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Creating Positive Opportunities in the Classroom.

Lucy Brannock

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Supervised by: Dr Bernadette Wynn and Dr Suzanne O’Keeffe

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Abstract

This project details an action research journey, a classroom-based study that sought to create positive opportunities for students with the intent of enhancing wellbeing. Wellbeing is a prominent focus in current educational circles (Fitzgearld & Dooley, 2012; NCCA, 2017). In July 2018, Minister Bruton introduced a new Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice for schools (DES, 2018) to enhance purposeful support to children. This project acknowledged the aims of the framework and worked out a number of strategies to help children overcome obstacles and to develop an individual's mental and emotional state.

The participants have been selected from an area where social deprivation is prevalent. The school is identified as a DEIS 1 primary school. DEIS is an acronym for Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, it was established by the Department of Education in 2005 (DES, 2005) to identify, support and target schools in challenging circumstances. The site for this research is a mixed gender school with 228 children on role including the fourteen participants in this study. Heeding the statistics derived from the *Growing up in Ireland Study* (2017), it is pertinent that the children in DEIS 1 schools are given tools to cope in challenging situations.

This study aimed to alter the common perception of a 'mistake', it offered coping mechanisms such as useful ways to emotionally regulate and it provided children with a moment of relaxation/reflection each day. Drawing on the work of Carol Dweck (2016) and Michael Sigleman (2007) a new classroom ethos was created, which cultivated an environment of growth and positivity. Growth mindset interventions were established in tandem with a course of six yoga classes and multiple mindfulness sessions. The data corpus was analysed through thematic data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013) and voice centred relational methods of data analysis (Byrne et al, 2009). This study found that the practice of yoga and meditation in a disadvantaged classroom context reduced stresses, enhanced self-awareness and helped children to emotionally regulate. The mindset interventions instilled the joy of discovery, offering children new perspectives towards challenges and cultivated a new perception of failure. It was found that the interventions spurred collaborative learning and better social relations between classmates. The results demonstrate that the implemented strategies hold academic and personal benefit to students.

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Chapter One: Rational and Introduction:

1.1 Personal Rational

I have worked as a teacher in a DEIS 1 school for five years and began an action research journey in September 2018. I am the eldest of my five siblings and privileged to have parents that are passionate about helping their children fulfill their best potentials in all areas of life, artistically, sportingly and educationally. The notion of a parent not prioritising every need of their child is something foreign to me, a contextual issue that I have fortunately never been privy to. It is the value of care that has been shown to me my entire life that acted as the catalyst to my research question.

1.2 Ontological and Epistemological Values

Epistemological values are formed as a result of how we view knowledge; our ontological values are how we see ourselves in comparison to others (Sullivan et al, 2016). My values of care, optimism, honesty, social justice, equality and empathy enable me to explain why I do what I do. There is a very clear overlap between my personal and professional values and in reality I think of them as one. I strongly value care and believe in social justice. I understand that the social, economical and political context that a child is born into has the potential to shape the way they view the world (Williams et al, 2018). I concur with the views of Henry Giroux (1986) when he writes that “the issue of teaching and learning is linked to the more political goal of educating students to take risks and to struggle within on-going relations of power to alter the oppressive conditions in which life is lived” (Giroux, 1986:226). I aspire to being the agent that encourages students to confront risks as I try to align my practice with the teachings of Giroux. Joe Kincheloe (1991) came to the conclusion that in

order to give children a fair opportunity to learn the teacher must critically reflect on the context of each child and the working environment of practice.

1.3 This Study's Context

The site for this research is a mixed gender school with 228 children on roll. The school identifies itself as a DEIS 1 primary school. DEIS is an acronym for Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools which was established by the Department of Education in 2005 (DES, 2005) to identify, support and target schools in challenging circumstances. DEIS acted as an umbrella term with the aim of bringing together several schemes of specific supports to tackle educational disadvantage (Smyth, 2017). Williams et al (2018) conducted an Irish study noting the significant impact a child's socio economic status they are born into has on a child's emotional and cognitive development. From before birth, a child's socio-economic status is predictor for both a child's language and academic outcomes (Quigley & Nixon, 2016). "12 per cent of children in Ireland live in poverty, a further 18 per cent are at risk of poverty, and children are 1.4 times more likely than adults to live in consistent poverty (Department of Social Protection, 2015)" (Cited in Williams et al, 2016:82). The participants in this project derive from an area where social deprivation is prevalent. These are extracts taken from a reflective task completed in November 2018. It highlights the "savage inequalities" (Greene, 1995:140) that children face within my context.



Figure 1.1

The picture is of a school uniform and a pupil's lunch. Uniform and lunch are standard essentials for school. However these basic requirements are not always met.

There have been numerous occasions this year when I have noticed one child, in particular, looking tired and regularly missing days. She is seven years old and from a family of nine children.

Every Monday this child opens her lunch box and it is full of last week's mouldy lunch. I have shown this child as much care as I can in school, I have sourced her a coat for cold days on yard, a new cardigan, gotten her lunch when needed and have attempted to make her feel as special as can be everyday. But is this enough?

According to the most recent data collected in The Growing up in Ireland Study (2017) children deriving from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to do less well in school (especially with language and mathematics) and complete fewer years in

education. Quigley & Nixon (2016) highlight that parental investment is crucial for a child's educational outcomes. The Growing up in Ireland Study notes a clear pattern: parents with a higher education are more invested in their children's. This is a result of economic circumstance that permeates through generations. Friedrich Froebel noted the important role a child's parents play in it's education:

“If there is one thing which more than any other demands to be rightly apprehended and reverently cherished it is the life of the family. Family life! Family life! Let me be frank and outspoken. Thou (family life) art more than school and Church! Thou art greater than all the institutions which necessity called into being for the protection of life and property!” (Froebel, 1909:155, cited in Bruce et al., 2018: 27).

The family units of the participants in this project are not conventional; in fact, within this study there is one participant in foster care and two participants from significantly troubled families. As I have previously noted, the presence of a supportive adult in an individual's life, for example a teacher, can have a profound impact on a child's wellbeing (Dooley & Fitzgerald 2012, cited in Hughes & Gibbons, 2018).

1.4 This Study's Aim

The aim of this study is to create positive opportunities for children with the intent of enhancing their wellbeing. The positive opportunities I allude to include offering strategies to overcome problems, a different way to view mistakes, offer coping mechanisms, useful ways to emotionally regulate and above all a moment of relaxation/reflection within the busy school day. As a child, every educational opportunity was afforded to me. My wellbeing was the priority of my parents and I had a constant safe environment at home. The participants in this study are not as fortunate. It was the context of this study that forged the overall aim of the project. I

believe I would not be living fully to my value of care and my value for social justice if I denied the children within my class these positive opportunities. When a teacher has a realisation of his/her identity within their teaching context there is often a “sense of agency, of empowerment to move ideas forward, to reach goals or even to transform the context” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009:183). I wanted to extend this feeling of empowerment to the children in my class. I did this by creating positive learning opportunities, promoting a growth mindset and incorporating yoga and meditation into the school day. The following chapters will detail the literature supporting the premise of my work, the project structure, the methodologies employed, the emerging findings and the resulting recommendations.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The primary role of a teacher is to ensure that students are effectively presented with the full curriculum and challenged to learn. The aim of the primary school curriculum in Ireland is to “enable the child to develop as a social being through living and co-operating with others and so contribute to the good of society” (NCCA, 1999:7). It is also the role of the teacher to meet the social and emotional needs of a student as outlined in the NCCA documents. A person’s emotional and social health begins at birth and continues throughout life. An essential element of social health is the construction and continual development of our sense of self (Wylie, 1961 cited in Weare 2000; Tobia and Valentina, 2019). A sense of self is ultimately linked to how we learn as well as how we grow to view ourselves over time (Weare, 2000; Dweck, 2000). A positive sense of self-esteem is essential for emotional health (Tobia and Valentina, 2019). It is imperative to develop a learner to the point of feeling included within their school and class as inclusion fosters a greater sense of self-worth initiating the journey of socialisation into the greater realm of society. For the purpose of this project I will be aligning ideology surrounding intelligence and wellbeing with the sole aim of creating positive learning experiences and opportunities for the children in my class.

2.2 Action Research

This study follows an action research approach. According to Sullivan, Glann, Roche and McDonagh (2016), action research is informed by a researcher’s values. Action research does not follow the normative approach to research. It tends to provide researchers with a self-study of their own work, resulting in a greater understanding of their profession, leading to systematic improvements in their teaching. Action

research is informed by researchers' values, norms and assumptions (Sullivan et al., 2016, p. 25). Many educationalists and politicians of the past have made an extensive list of values relevant to education. However these values tend to be moral values. I would agree with Berkowitz (1996, cited in Veugelers & Vedder, 2003), that there is a difference between values and norms. A norm is the social construction of a value based on context however moral values are constructed within a context. Within the Irish context values are not explicitly taught in the classroom. They are subtly acknowledged throughout the curriculum and modelled by the teacher with the hope that values move from an abstract subject into a living example. Teachers ultimately stimulate the development of values through modelling their own. "Teachers can never be value free, their values are being reflected by their subject matter, their explanations and their behaviour" (Goodlad et al. 1990; Gudmundsdottir, 1990, cited in Veugelers & Vedder, 2003:388). Therefore, for the purpose of this research project it is essential to note the significance that this methodology holds for the benefit of both teacher and student. Action research can take more than one form as the intention is to generate knowledge on a specific area of practice. This particular study is a self-study action research project, and the overarching aim of this project is to generate knowledge surrounding growth mindset, wellbeing, yoga and meditation.

2.3 Research on Emotional Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a prominent topic within educational circles at the moment (Fitzgearld & Dooley, 2012; NCCA, 2017). Within the Irish context there has been great efforts in recent years by the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive to work collaboratively to promote wellbeing in primary schools (Caulfield, 2017). In July 2018 Minister Bruton introduced the Wellbeing Policy Statement and the framework for practice in schools (DES, 2018). The policy's

direct focus is on the promotion of wellbeing and acts as a tool for teachers and parents to help prevent the rise of anxiety, emotional issues and stresses for children. There is evidence that suggests a direct link between emotional wellbeing and learning (Seligman et al, 2007; NCCA, 2017). The NCCA are urging schools and educators to revisit their definitions of wellbeing. Wellbeing is made up of many variables and is not a steadfast state (Smyth, 2015; Fitzgearld & Dooley, 2012; NCCA, 2017). Therefore, there is no clear one-fits-all definition. ‘Well becoming’ is the most recent characterisation coined by the NCCA (2017). ‘Well becoming’ insinuates that wellbeing is a life long journey. Emer Smyth (2015) describes the important connection between emotions and education. Smyth notes that there has been a large amount of research indicating the quality of a teacher-student relationship can have a significant impact on a child’s socio-emotional wellbeing. The *My World Survey* conducted by Jigsaw (a mental health service for young people) came to a similar conclusion. The survey noted that the presence of a supportive adult in an individual’s life, for example a teacher, can have a profound impact on a child’s wellbeing (Dooley & Fitzgerald 2012, cited in Hughes & Gibbons, 2018). Within the Irish curriculum, particularly during the early years, there is a curriculum link to wellbeing; it is in the form of Aistear (NCCA, 2009). Wellbeing is one of the four central themes of Aistear and a core element of the curriculum for both junior and senior infants. The theme of wellbeing further permeates through primary school classes in the form of SPHE (Social, Physical, Health, Education) and PE (Physical Education). For the purpose of this project both SPHE and PE will act as the vehicles to carry the interventions that will be later discussed in the methodology chapter.

2.4 Happiness

A common practise of social scientists is to use the term subjective wellbeing to define happiness (Noddings, 2003; Alan et al, 2017). An emotional state of happiness is the overarching goal of humanity (Gentzler et al, 2019). Happiness is one of the first emotions a child has the ability to express (Noddings, 2003; Alan et al, 2017). Researchers, in recent years, have begun to investigate how to promote happiness; it is becoming an area of increasing focus for much of the research conducted within the UK and America (Cohen, 2006; Alan et al, 2017). Happiness refers to both positive emotions and activities, yet as Nell Noddings noted, it is rarely spoken about in depth in educational circles (Noddings, 2003). There is also a correlation between happiness and improved health, more successful relations with others and a more productive work practise. (Gentzler et al, 2019). Aristotle acknowledged that the many contributors towards achieving happiness include health, reputation, wealth and freedom from fear and worry. While there is no explicit way to teach happiness (Cohen, 2006) I also believe it would be wrong to define happiness for another person. Instead such interventions should be indirect. Thus, the objective of this project is to enable positive opportunities for children with the aim of creating an appropriate environment that will eventually forge a happier state of mind.

2.5 What is a Growth and Fixed Mindset?

The defining work of Carol Dweck has been a catalyst in developing this project. Dweck studies the impact mindset can have on people's capacity to succeed. She questions why people differ and why some people persevere with challenges yet others give up. Dweck's findings suggest there are two types of mind-set; the fixed mindset and the growth mindset (Dweck, 2016).

2.5.1 A Fixed Mindset

A fixed mindset is a belief that an individual is born with a stagnant amount of ability and intelligence (Brock & Hundley, 2016). A person with a fixed mindset would view success as ascertaining superiority (Dweck, 2016). They believe that effort is not something to be proud of as it diminishes their natural talents. Therefore, people with a fixed mind-set tend to avoid challenges for fear of failure, which ultimately deprives them of opportunities to enrich their learning (Brock & Hundley, 2016).

2.5.2 A Growth Mindset

In contrast, a growth mindset is a belief that success can be achieved through perseverance; in essence, finding happiness through improvement rather than results (Dweck, 2016). A person with this type of mindset utilises their setbacks as motivating learning curves, resulting in informative progression in whatever realm they are focused on, such as business, sport or education. Longitude research has noted the students who actively utilise a growth mindset invest time into problems solving, use positive self-regulation strategies and have greater academic achievements when compared to those who have a fixed mindset (Thomas et al, 2019).

Martin Seligman, the author of *The Optimistic Child* (2007), compliments the work of Carol Dweck. Dweck (2017) states that people with a growth mindset find a sense of success in learning and improving. People with a growth mindset “derive just as much happiness from the progress as from the result” (Dweck, 2017: 98). Because a core aim of this project is to create positive learning opportunities for children, Seligman’s work was particularly useful with its explanations of ‘masterful action’, a term he coined, to describe a method for forging optimism in preschool children. He describes

how masterful action is “making a habit of persisting in the face of challenge and overcoming obstacles” (Seligman et al, 2007: 12). In accord with Dweck, Seligman is attempting to alter the interpretation of failure. Failure is a minor setback and not a steadfast catastrophe. It is imperative to model to children that “setbacks are motivating. They’re informative. They’re a wake-up call” (Dweck, 2017: 99).

It is the responsibility of a parent, teacher or coach to avoid conditioning a child into a state of helplessness, forging a pessimistic outlook and fixed mindset (Seligman et al, 2007; Dweck, 2017). With the work of these scholars in mind, I intend to create positive opportunities and experiences for the participants of this project with the aim of fostering a philosophy of optimism. I plan to explore the benefits of developing a growth mindset. Children can learn the cognitive skills of a growth mindset; if a child is pessimistic and has a fixed mindset, it is a parent or teacher that can model optimism and a growth mindset approach to learning (Seligman et al, 2007; Brock & Hundley, 2016; Dweck, 2017). Providing children with strategies to overcome challenges and modelling a growth mindset will be a core aim of this study’s interventions. This will be discussed in further detail in the methodology chapter.

2.6 Progressive Education

I believe in progressive education. I am aware that the traditional Irish educational system is largely biased towards cognitive ability. I intend to challenge that bias. The philosopher Howard Gardner suggests the existence of multiple intelligences (1993). He, in short, provided a means of mapping a broad range of intelligences. He argues that people can have more than one form of intelligence. Gardner recognised that all intelligences are potentially beneficial and provide opportunities for achievement and that no matter what form they took they needed to be acknowledged.

In light of this range of intelligences, as espoused by Gardner, it is a teacher's role to find out which type of intelligence a child has and create opportunities for that child to excel to its particular strengths. When utilising a growth mindset approach the educator is doing just that; s/he is setting a challenge in a particular area where a child is already comfortable. Dweck (2017) states that people with a growth mindset find a sense of success in learning and improving, such students "derive just as much happiness from the progress as from the result" (Dweck, 2017: 98). However, multiple intelligence is not without its critics; there is a view that "multiple intelligence dumbs down the curriculum to make all students mistakenly believe they are smart" (Armstrong, 2009:195). Willingham (cited in Armstrong, 2009), for example, criticised the idea of singing spellings; in his view the notion of combining intelligence in this manner was trivial. Yet Armstrong (2009) himself disagrees, contending that the spelling strategy was one of a thousand ideas to generate knowledge combining intelligences and that multiple intelligence theory can be used in a variety of different simple and more complex pedagogical goals.

When actively engaged in teaching, it becomes very evident that each student has different levels of ability and aptitudes towards various different aspects of the curriculum. It is important to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each student. It is also important to explain to a class that not everyone excels at everything and that some people struggle with subjects that others find easy. It is essential to emphasise the need to set goals, particularly in subject areas that children find difficult, and to encourage them to rise to the challenge one small step at a time. In that way, I hope to help children to develop a growth mindset and to enhance their capacity for multiple

intelligences. Where they find a subject easy to learn I will direct them towards an alternate more complex challenge with the aim of continuing to advance their self-esteem and confidence. Successful learning requires nurturing and growth of core abilities over time through continuously challenging work (Dweck et al, 2014). Dweck's argument is compelling as the end goal of a teacher is to develop a child's core ability and mindset with an aim towards enabling effective long-term learning.

2.7 Challenges with the Implementation of a Growth Mindset

I am aware that a growth mindset may be more difficult to foster in some extreme circumstances such as those that can be encountered in schools in socio-economically deprived areas. In order to achieve a growth mindset there is also a need for stability and support and children may need to be living in a positive environment. As Dweck stated in a speech given in Stanford University 2014, it is a basic human right to live in environments that create growth. However, growing up in the constraints of poverty and its associated social problems has an impact on a child's physical, emotional and mental wellbeing (Smyth, 2015). As a result, children from lower income families have a less successful transition into primary school, triggering negative behaviour, which can permeate throughout their lives (Smyth, 2015). A recent study carried out in Brazil (Thomas et al, 2019) uncovered that deeper social constructions can impact on a child's mindset. The study reiterates the point alluded to in the introduction, that in order to develop a growth mindset a child requires trust in adults and the world around them (Thomas et al, 2019, Dooley & Fitzgerald 2012, cited in Hughes & Gibbons, 2018). Socio-economic status has a profound impact on a child's mindset development and a teacher can have a role in nourishing a child's mindset. Mindset can be shaped through interactions with parents, friends, coaches

and teachers (Dweck, 2017). However, the construction of mindset can be developed and influenced by the underlying conception a child has of trust and fairness in society as well as their relationships with people around them (Thomas et al, 2019). Children must be given a fair and consistent environment to create a sense of power over their future. Building such environments in classrooms with a low socio-economic background has been found to promote fairness and reduce anxiety/uncertainty towards the future (Thomas et al, 2019).

2.8 Irish Context

A study conducted in an Irish context (Golden et al, 2016) notes that there are two major factors that determine a child's success in school: The child's socio-emotional capacity and the child's ability to self-regulate. Together these characteristics determine whether a child will pay attention, have the ability to follow directions, interact well with both peers and teachers and have the ability to control negative emotions and behaviours (Golden et al, 2016). Such experiences for the child are ultimately then linked with how the child feels about and views school (Ladd 2009, Cited in Golden et al, 2016).

A study, conducted in Chile (Claro et al, 2016), set out to investigate the correlation between socioeconomic backgrounds and psychological factors, such as a student's confidence in its own abilities. Claro et al. found that family income has a dominant influence when attaining achievement that correlates with the Irish educational experience. Research has demonstrated that economic disadvantage can affect a student's educational achievement. For example, a study conducted in Northern Ireland (NI) compared the attitudes of students in an advantaged and a disadvantaged

school (Horgan, 2009) and described the stark contrasts that became evident in its findings: in disadvantaged schools, children as young as nine and ten were beginning to disengage with school. Older children were less likely to describe learning in a positive light. The (NI) study reported that the children from a disadvantaged background were made aware of their social position at a young age (Horgan, 2009). It is believed (Horgan, 2009) that children accepted this and it reflected in their schooling experiences.

In contrast to the NI study, the research undertaken in Chile demonstrated some positive outcomes. Both socio-economic factors and psychological factors were part of the Chilean work. Researchers asked “Is there evidence that economic disadvantage reinforces the fixed mindset? Is a fixed mindset even more deleterious to economically disadvantaged students because they must overcome greater obstacles to succeed?” (Claro et al, 2016:8664). The findings were as follows: students who had a growth mindset out-performed their peers at each family income level (Claro et al, 2016). This type of mindset remained a highly dependable predictor of achievement across many tests indicating that there is a direct correlation between achievement and mindset. If there were two students with similar attributes from contrasting socio-economic backgrounds the student endorsing a growth mindset was found to have a higher academic achievement, highlighting the benefits of a growth mindset (Claro et al, 2016).

This study also noted that if a student has a fixed mindset and is from a lower socio-economic background it is “more debilitating” (Claro et al, 2016:8667). Such students had a greater number of barriers to cross in order to succeed (Claro et al, 2016). For

the purpose of my study this is a key finding. The participants in my study are from a lower socio-economic background. I believe it is imperative to cultivate a growth mindset from a young age in order to provide psychological advantage when faced with an adverse situation in education or life for this cohort.

The study performed in Chile (Claro et al, 2016) recognises that having a growth mindset will not eradicate the income inequality or affect the quality of schooling. It also highlights how a growth mindset is an effective tool for students who struggle as a result of socio-economic circumstances. This study was of particular interest to me in the context of my school that mirrors some of the situations in this body of research. It has highlighted that having a growth mindset is a gateway tool to escape adverse circumstances. I am not suggesting it is an easy path for any student in my class but is it reassuring to learn it has been proven that there is a direct correlation between mindset and achievement (Claro et al, 2016). An article published by the INTO in September (2018) urges teachers in Ireland to adopt Carol Dweck's theory and jumpstart growth mindset within classrooms. The article hones in on five simple ways to promote a growth mindset. Simply introducing growth mindset interventions to the class is a first step. Then combining that with constructive feedback, allows more group work. Offering challenging work is another tool that can be deployed. These are strategies that have proven effective and will be discussed in greater depth below.

Stephen Brookfield wrote that the very least a teacher should aim towards is leaving students "more curious, smarter, more knowledgeable and more skilful than before we taught them" (Brookfield, 2017:1). By exposing children to the possibilities that can

occur when overcoming challenges, the teacher hopes to stimulate a desire to learn. However, like Brookfield, I also would aspire to “help students act toward each other, and to their environment, with compassion, understanding and fairness” (Brookfield, 2017:1) with the aim to building a new set of skills, deepening their understanding and enhancing their self-confidence (Brookfield, 2017).

Daniel Goleman (1995) built on Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligence theory by adding the affective dimension. Goleman believes that both thinking and intelligence feeds into emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is broken into four parts:

- Self-awareness
- Managing our emotions
- Empathy
- Social skills

Emotional intelligence can be viewed as the ability to understand, utilise and manage the emotions of oneself and others (Walton and Hibbard, 2019). Many researchers have stressed the importance the quality of a child’s learning environment and their social emotional capacity (Walton and Hibbard, 2019, Denham et al, 2012). A child’s social emotional capacity is made up of three parts: “(1) identifying the emotions that another is displaying, (2) identifying and expressing the emotions that one is feeling, and (3) regulating the expression of one’s emotion to interact socially” (Walton and Hibbard, 2019: 199). The benefits of a child mastering these skills are both academic and social (Walton and Hibbard, 2019, Denham et al, 2012). If a child has developed their social emotional capacity it has been found that they are able to efficiently problem-solve in social emotional situations that arise (Denham et al, 2012). There has been progress with regards to fostering children’s emotional intelligence in

Ireland. Promoting emotional wellbeing in schools is strongly advocated by the Department of Education. The NCCA has recently published the guidelines for Wellbeing in its Junior Cycle. It encompasses learning opportunities set out to promote the “Physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing of students” (NCCA, 2017:8). The direct definition of wellbeing has been a topic of debate for many years (Dodge et al, 2012). However, it is widely considered to encapsulate both good feelings and functioning wellbeing (Dodge et al, 2012).

2.9 Current Irish Schools

Schools in today’s society are viewed as key agencies to prevent fundamental problems such as social and emotional issues from arising. There is a notable rise in the number of younger people today suffering from anxiety; The Child Mental Health Service estimated that one in ten children suffer from mental health disorders (CAMHS 2012-2013). It is imperative that teachers are aware that such disorders take many forms. It has been my observation that children, who are suffering with mental health disorders, manifest their outward expression through challenging behaviour. A teacher has the responsibility to explore such behaviour. The identification of the mental issues that children may display in a classroom is difficult. For example, a child with Attention Hyperactivity Deficit Disorder (ADHD) and learning needs may also have Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). However, the characteristics of this disorder may go undiagnosed and be explained as challenging behaviour. Yet, if a teacher adopted a holistic approach to teaching, acknowledged that children have multiple intelligences and need the time to develop emotionally, it could minimise the risk to the wellbeing of a child presenting with these behaviours.

Jonathan Cohen (2006) argues that the way education is viewed needs to be reframed. He believes in the importance of social and emotional competencies as well as the obvious academic learning. When integrating these three into teaching practices, an educator can “hone the essential academic and social skills, understanding, and dispositions that support the effective participation in democracy. In doing so they are also laying the foundation for well-being and the pursuit of happiness” (Cohen, 2006:202). Throughout Cohen’s paper he poses a very interesting question, “What do we really want our children to have accomplished when they graduate?” (Cohen, 2006:202). What do I want the children in my class to accomplish within this year? Do I strive simply for the overall aim of the Irish curriculum to “enable the child to develop as a social being through living and co-operating with others and so contribute to the good of society” (NCCA, 1997:7) or do I want more? Surely, to contribute to the good of society, a person would have to respect others, have a regard for fairness, equality, the ability to collaboratively work with others and a concern for justice (Michelle and Keiser, cited in Cohen, 2006). Without having generated a conversation about these attributes on a regular basis in school, would a student be fundamentally capable of contributing to the good of society? For the purpose of this project I will assume that Cohen is correct that there has to be a shift from the belief that academic learning is the only form of child development. This theory, allied with the ideology of Gardner and Goleman, elucidate for me a philosophy that mirrors my own thinking and the premise for this project.

Nel Noddings provides an interesting view on the importance of care and coercion in schools (2001). She opined on the reform that needs to take place and the misconception of the word ‘care’ within the educational spectrum. There is the

assumption that care is given to each child by their teacher, yet it is through this level of care that comes coercion in schools. Noddings alludes that, as a result of an educator caring for the students, s/he places too much of an emphasis on standardised tests suggesting that because a teacher strives for the best possible results, s/he unconsciously forgets about a child's wellbeing (2001). The results of the distorted *rationale* for care has resulted in second class children having sleepless nights and making themselves ill before tests (Noddings, 2001). It also influences the educator and affects his/her work. There have been reports of teachers cheating to make their schools/class seem better (Noddings, 2001). Such conduct is undertaken all in the name of care. Placing these pressures on children undoubtedly creates stress but also alienates children who are not the most academic by overemphasising certain areas of learning, in particular, literary or mathematical subjects. Having a choice and a range of subjects was viewed negatively. The intention of this method was that all children should take the same subjects and be judged accordingly against one another (Mortimer Adler 1982, cited in Noddings, 2001).

This constant competition between students and the need to be a well-rounded student in important subjects needs to be challenged. Instead, in accord with the arguments outlined above, it is essential to view each child as an individual, learning to appreciate what each child brings to the classroom and identifying each child's strengths and weaknesses. Noddings, like Cohen, believes that there ought to be a reformation of the aims of education. She urges educators to adopt a moral approach to education, whereby a learner can have emotional satisfaction with results given that the criteria are set in accordance with the person's strengths. I think my approach and

teaching style would encompass this theory and this quote from Noddings mirrors the essence of this project:

“Achievement without positive affect is morally and aesthetically empty. Positive affect without achievement is a delusion.” (Noddings, 2011:42)

As an educator one should strive towards a deeply satisfying education for one’s pupils, helping them grow emotionally as well as academically. This cannot be achieved without care and without the realisation that each student is an individual. There are benchmarks a child must meet and there is also is a demanding curriculum to teach, however this dissertation contends that this can be achieved at a steady pace in order to successfully instil a joy of learning.

There are, however, educational critics who pose the idea that there is a threat of schooling becoming overly emotional (Dixon, 2018). There is a fear that there has been a shift away from educational rigour and a move from subject-based knowledge and more of a focus on a “curriculum of the self” (Ecclestone cited in Dixon, 2018). Dixon (2018) argues that education and emotion have always been linked through time. Dixon (2018) points out that education in the nineteenth century was a moral education that has transcended and been reformed into a social and emotional curriculum (Dixon, 2018).

2.10 SPHE

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is vital for the emotional development of students. Aspects of wellbeing are embedded within the SPHE curriculum (NCCA, 2015) which was introduced in 1990. SPHE was introduced into the curriculum in 1990. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1990 served as a

catalyst. As a follow-on from the Act, the Department of Education committed itself to the social and personal development of a child. The SPHE curriculum encapsulates:

- A child's personal development.
- A child's health and well-being
- The creation and maintenance of supportive relationships
- Becoming an active and responsible member of society

The SPHE curriculum is broken into three strands: Myself, Myself and Others, and Myself and the Wider World. SPHE provides the opportunity to foster wellbeing and personal development (NCCA, 2015). I aimed to develop a mindfulness programme for my Second Class students. As SPHE is a subject area that has a particular focus on wellbeing, I feel it is an apt fit for this project. Jenny Mosley's 'Circle-Time' is one of the most widely recognised and practised social interventions in schools (Cefia et al, 2013). Circle-time is a safe space whereby the students in my class are encouraged to express their feelings, fears and thoughts (Cefia et al, 2013). The teacher takes a facilitator's role and the children adopt a more active role. This promotes the development of communication skills. It gives a self-directed lesson on the importance of speaking clearly, listening to whoever is talking, keeping eye contact and turn-taking. These may seem to be trivial skills that are innate, however, in this context they were very much learnt and there is still a need for continuous practise. Circle-time allows opportunities for simple questioning that helps pupils to clarify their thoughts, their wants, needs and even their frustrations. A study was conducted in a school with very similar criteria to those of my school. A small school in Malta adopted circle time and has had resoundingly positive effects. There was a benefit for teacher-pupil relationships, and "enhanced motivation and engagement in academic

learning, such as listening, speaking and problem solving” (Pace, 2012, cited in Cefia et al, 2013:118).

2.11 Meditation and Mindfulness

Meditation can act as an active ingredient in constructing human wellbeing (Goleman & Riachards, 2017). Meditation was never intended to improve psychological problems (Patton et al, 2019), yet in forty-seven case studies it has been proven that meditation has led to a decrease in depression, anxiety and pain (Goleman & Riachards, 2017). Methods of meditation are constructed with the purpose to improve and strengthen attention (Goleman & Riachards, 2017, Patton et al, 2019). Utilising meditation in the classroom brings many advantages. If a child lacks the ability to concentrate and focus there would be little learning. Utilising meditation as an attention-building tool is a departure from traditional academic skills such as reading and writing. Yet, it develops and enhances the ability to focus, a skill which may then be utilised throughout life.

Lisa Flook (2015) developed a mindfulness-based kindness curriculum in her classroom. Kindness, compassion, empathy and caring fall under the umbrella of emotional intelligence. This intelligence is largely ignored within the constraints of the Irish curriculum. The curriculum begins with very simple mindfulness which primarily focuses on breathing exercises. Mindfulness follows a similar premise to meditation in that it’s primary aim is to enhance attention (Flook, 2015). Through the continuous practice of mindfulness children are enabled to improve their ability to emotionally regulate (Lutz et al., 2010, cited in Flook, 2015). I believe that mindfulness in education offers students a much-needed opportunity to reflect. It is

my experience and observation that the students in my particular class have many troubling issues that are a result of their circumstances. I find myself in accord with Flook as my observations thus far have led me to conclude that it is through interventions at school that the wellbeing of the child can be demonstrably improved.

There are many mindfulness programmes that have been widely adopted around the world and adapted into education. Relatively short mindfulness programmes implemented in the classroom have improved the opinion teachers have had of their students' behaviour (Bazzano et al, 2018). There is also potential for "improving cognitive performance and resilience to stress among children" (Bazzano et al, 2018:81). Greenland wrote a book, *The Mindful Child* (2010), that is aimed towards parents and professionals. It encapsulates various practices that can be taught to children, resulting in enhanced concentration and the ability to emotionally regulate as the most positive outcome. Clodagh McCarthy founded Bright Sparks Coaching in 2010; this is an organisation that brings mindfulness into the classroom. McCarthy has developed a range of workshops, which she delivers in schools to both children and teachers. The aim is to support teachers to integrate mindfulness into the SPHE curriculum and to promote positive wellbeing for children. I think it is encouraging to know that these services are available within the Irish educational sphere and that there are a wide range of books, programmes and studies being conducted in this field. Schools can utilise services such as these as a means of continuous professional development which will have the effect of benefiting the children.

I believe in creating an atmosphere in schools based on mutual respect. In order to create positive opportunities for the children I think there is a need for children to

develop holistically. The creation of a sense of safety within the school environment is of primary importance. A student should feel that everyone, no matter what age, nationality, sex or ethnicity, is welcome. Research conducted by Smyth, Dunne, Darmody and McCoy (2007, cited in Motherway, 2011:27) found that students “were more likely to like school if they had a positive integration with teachers, while bullying was also less of a concern for students where a positive school climate prevailed.” Utilising the curriculum to encompass the emotional development of a child is difficult. However, for the purpose of this project I integrated yoga as a part of my physical education programme during an eight-week block.

2.12 Yoga

Yoga is a holistic system that combines the body and the mind. It has been proven to benefit both the physical and mental health of participants (Butzer et al, 2014). Yoga originated in India and has been practiced for over 2,000 years. Yoga trains both the mind and body to bring an emotional balance to the body (Hagen and Nayar, 2014). There are various styles of yoga, poses and techniques (Vorkapic et al, 2015). The “psychophysiological benefit of yoga and meditation on adults has demonstrated improvements in emotional self-regulation” (Vorkapic, et al, 2015:17). This definition would imply that yoga has the ability to improve adults’ ability to emotionally regulate. It follows that if yoga was introduced at a young age that children would reap the benefits earlier in life. Ultimately, it is an exercise that promotes strength, flexibility and aims to cultivate a mental release of stress and tensions (Butzer et al, 2014). There are many schools now implementing yoga as a cost-effective wellness program (Vorkapic et al, 2015). A study carried out in a primary school in Maine, USA, concentrated on two classes - second and third grade. The reason this particular

study was of interest to me was the fact the children were the same age as the participants in this study. The goal of the ten-week study was to investigate whether there would be a behavioural change after the implementation of a half hour of yoga each week (Butzer et al, 2014). The result showed significant improvements for the second grade class. There were improvements in social interactions, attention span, ability to manage emotions, to control behaviour and in their overall mood (Butzer et al, 2014). This would suggest that yoga in the classroom has a definitive positive affect on children, emotionally and cognitively. As I have previously stated I have concerns for the children in my class with regards to their mental health. I argue that children in today's society endure daily stresses, which include peer exclusion, peer pressure, academic performance concerns, parental pressure, being victim of bullying and homework difficulties. Scholars contend that the result of such built-up stress makes a significant impact on children's mental wellbeing (Bazzano et al, 2018). Because children experience these levels of anxiety, it is essential to teach coping mechanisms and coping strategies from a young age (Bazzano et al, 2018).

There was a recent study conducted between October 2016 – February 2017, whereby a group of 20 children out of a year of 52 children were chosen at random to participate in an 8-week yoga and mindfulness programme (Bazzano et al, 2018). There was a yoga-education curriculum utilised for the duration of the 8 weeks. Each session was forty minutes long and it took place before school (Bazzano et al, 2018). The study produced data that indicates that both the children and teachers in the study benefited greatly from the intervention. The students who were a part of the study demonstrated an improvement in emotional and psycho-social quality of their lives in comparison to the children who did not take part in the study (Bazzano et al, 2018).

As an educator I am impressed by this study as it highlighted the important fact - that the mind of a child is impressionable. A child needs to be taught how to process emotions, be given coping strategies as well as the basic curriculum schooling that is currently in place in schools today.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is a step-by-step process outlining, justifying and explaining the methodology used within this study. It examines in detail the modes of enquiry employed to engage with this research project. Each section of this chapter details the research design, methodology, methodological tools, ethical issues and structure of interventions. “Research design includes a concrete and specific statement of the aims and objectives of the research as set out in the overall research purposes” (Cohen et al, 2018:165) At the initial stages of this research I devised questions and in so doing actively explored specific concerns relating to the overall research purposes. The formulated questions/concerns sought answers to specific concerns such as; “How do I create positive *opportunities* for the children in my classroom?”, “How may I change the teaching style of my classroom from a traditional method of instruction and assessment to a classroom orientated towards a growth mindset approach?”, “How do I measure any potential improvement to children’s wellbeing? This chapter details the methods deployed to answer the above questions.

3.2 Project Methodology

I conducted this research with an action research approach. The terms, method and methodology underpin the approach a researcher uses to gather data that is later evaluated and interpreted (Cohen et al, 2018). Schon (1983) used the term reflective practitioner to describe a researcher who focuses on reflection to enhance their own learning (cited in Herr and Anderson, 2005). Participatory evaluation is a process of involving participants in order to encourage a critical reflection on their own projects. Action research appealed to me as it tends to provide researchers with a self-study of

their own work, resulting in a greater understanding of their profession and leading to systematic improvements in their teaching (McNiff, 2002; Sullivan et al, 2016; Lochmiller and Lester, 2017). Action research follows an inquiry cycle, and it can be categorised into four steps. See Figure 3.1 for details.



Figure 3.1

These four steps are relevant to this study as it was essential to identify their presence throughout the research timeframe. (Lochmiller and Lester, 2017). Action research is informed by researchers' "values, norms and assumptions" (Sullivan et al., 2016:25). It is through a researcher's ontological assumptions, which underpin a researcher's epistemological assumptions, that in turn gives rise to the chosen methodologies and tools of data collection (Cohen et al, 2018).

3.3 A Methodology that correlates with my values

This project is rooted within my ontological and epistemological values and therefore will influence my research methodology. As I explained within the introduction of this study epistemological values are formed as a result of how we view knowledge.

Our ontological values are how we see ourselves in comparison to others (Sullivan et al, 2016). My values of care, optimism, honesty, social justice, equality and empathy enable me to explain why I do what I do. McNiff and Whitehead (2002) argue that living theory would not emerge from research if the researcher does not play a central role in the action. “If they write about practice but do not explain their own they are not engaging with the issues they are speaking about. Contradictory situations arise” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002:25). Whitehead (1989a) believes that by following a living approach to generate educational theory there must be a living relationship between student, teacher and researcher. As a result of human nature and the combination of both living research and researchers’ values, frequent contradictions arise. Whitehead has coined these conflicting moments as living contradictions. The very nature of an action research project is, as I have previously mentioned, cyclical and also an enquiry into the researcher themselves. It uncovers truths that may seem invasive and reveal a contradiction of values. Yet it is these contradictions that spurs change and ignites action. Hence the reason for adopting the action research methodology to this project. According to Carey, every child is different and there is no one-way to learn; children need to be given options in order to find where their strengths lie (Carey, 2005). The primary focus of this project involves creating various positive opportunities in a classroom setting whilst giving children the tools to develop a growth mindset.

As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, the participants in this project are largely from disadvantaged backgrounds where general wellbeing is neglected. My epistemological value of care and social justice has acted as the catalyst for this project. I aim to create a positive opportunity for each child with the intent of

enhancing wellbeing. I believe the social, economic and political context a child is born into has the potential to shape the way they see the world. I concur with the views of Henry Giroux (1986) when he writes that “the issue of teaching and learning is linked to the more political goal of educating students to take risks and to struggle within on-going relations of power to alter the oppressive conditions in which life is lived” (Giroux, 1986: 226). I aspire to being the agent that encourages the student to confront these risks as I try to align my practice with the teachings of Giroux. I strongly believe that by introducing growth mindset techniques to the participants in this project, there is a possibility that they will become useful outside of the classroom within their own communities. Unlike Dewey, Giroux has acknowledged that self-empowerment and social empowerment of students goes beyond the politics of the classroom; he realises the significance of the social struggle outside of schools. In an Irish study (Williams et al, 2018) it has been noted there is a significant difference in children’s outcomes as a result of their socio-economic status, cognitive and socio-emotional development (examples include Green et al, 2005; Duncan et al, 2010; Cooper and Stewart, 2013 cited in Williams et al, 2018). Such problems are present before the child is born and last a lifetime. The aim of this project is to build self-esteem, confidence and give the participants a safe space to think and relax within the school setting. The nature of this research requires close collaboration with participants and action research provides this platform. Involving students through their participation in action research is “a promising approach for an accessible, evidence-based, and developmentally beneficial approach to better understand student well-being.” (Halliday et al, 2017:20).

3.4 The research paradigm

This project is largely qualitative in terms of research instruments. There are also quantitative research elements but they contribute in a less significant way. “Qualitative research is a loosely defined term that includes a vast range of kinds of research, has a wide range of meanings and covers a heterogeneity of fields (Preissle, 2006; Hammersley, 2013:9)” (Cited in Cohen et al, 2018:287). To ensure a study is qualitative in nature, a researcher must adhere to certain guidelines. The study must be conducted within a natural setting as the background context is imperative to the meaning and results. Humans are the primary research instrument (Cohen et al, 2018 & Polkinghorne, 2007). A conceptualisation plan created by Jane Tracy (2010) breaks down the key components of qualitative research. There were eight components created as a pedagogical tool for researchers to reference to ensure meaningful qualitative research:

“(a) worthy topic referring to a topic’s relevance and significance.

(b) rich rigor, referring to samples, contexts and data collection.

(c) sincerity, referring to self-reflexivity about subjective values and biases of the researcher.

(d) credibility, thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit knowledge and triangulation.

(e) resonance, referring to the research influences, affects aesthetic, evocative representation.

(f) significant contribution, the research provides a significant contribution, conceptually/theoretically, morally.

(g) ethics, the research considers, procedural ethics (such as human subjects)

(h) meaningful coherence, the study uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals”.(Tracy, 2010:879).

Qualitative research lends itself to studying the natural environments and often focuses on how people view and experience the world (Lochmiller and Lester, 2017). For the purpose of this project, qualitative research will act as a window into the minds of the participants. Traditional forms of research are grounded in scientific positive approaches that would imply there is a single measurable reality (Lochmiller and Lester, 2017; Cohen et al, 2018). Quantitative research, on the other hand, relies on the analysis of numeric data and teacher and researcher are considered as separate. However the researcher, as an instrument, enables collection of data as it occurs and “often seeks to make sense of the social practices” (Lochmiller and Lester, 2017:93). In order to create positive opportunities within the classroom it is essential to observe participants in their natural setting thus allowing the researcher to identify any arising issue or areas that demand attention.

For the purpose of this project Paulo Freire’s ideology resonates with my own educational values. Enormous importance and significance relies on the process of creating educational experience for students within the classroom. This responsibility lies with the educator who is accountable for the children’s learning. Qualitative research lends itself to a naturalistic observation of a child’s learning. Freire promoted a problem-posing education, a theory of cognitive development, focusing on the freedom given to children for higher-order cognitive growth and critical thinking (Freire, 1970). One of the main components of this project is based around promotion of a growth mindset - an aim to instil a joy of discovery and ignite an excitement around problem-solving. Joe Kincheloe held similar views as Freire - he believed in

practitioner research. Kincheloe was of the opinion that teachers, as practitioners of their own practice, were the “perpetuation of oppression throughout the well intentioned efforts of educators” (Kincheloe, 1991, cited in Sullivan et al, 2016:35). Kincheloe added to Freire’s theories and came to the conclusion that in order to give children a fair opportunity to learn, the teacher must critically reflect on their context, their practice and must set challenges. In order to gather data effectively and ethically qualitative methods were utilised. The process of reflection was also relied on quite heavily. Reflection is a key component to action research and this lends itself a qualitative approach. Generating data from observations, fields notes and conversations ultimately mirrors the goals of this project, which suggests, and aims to demonstrate, that an action research study with a qualitative paradigm is the most effective and beneficial methodology for teacher and student.

3.5 Methodological tools.

3.5.1 Observations

Observation is live data which is acquired from a natural, authentic setting. It allows participants to speak, act and behave naturally (Cohen et al, 2018). Observation as a tool for collecting data is sensitive to context which gives a more nuanced view on the participants. To ensure validity I chose to observe and record what is fair and not take observations out of context or embellish truths. As observations are natural, they can lack a sense of control and are unpredictable. For the purpose of this project I utilised a semi-structured observation approach utilising a checklist during the children's yoga class. I followed a naturalistic and participant approach. This approach is particularly useful in small scale research projects that have a short time frame (Cohen et al, 2018). The participant as an observer allowed the researcher to be a part of the

observations and record what had happened while playing an active role in the event. I believe that the data collected from observations give reality to the situations at play.

3.5.2 Reflective Journal

A reflective journal stems from observations. However, reflection is an inherently difficult word and concept to define. Reflection is an exercise that carries more than one meaning: it can be defined as a form of mental processing, a form of purposeful thinking (Moon, 1999). It is seen as a method of informing practice through reason (Schön, 1988), a specialised form of actively thinking and constructing a belief grounded in knowledge (Dewey, 1993). Knowles (1993) stresses that there are many facets regarding the construction of a reflective practice yet the common denominator in all is that “reflection is an intra-personal process, through which personal and professional knowing can occur” (Knowles, 1993:83) A reflective journal provides both data related to the researchers practice but will also generate data on their given topic (Sullivan et al., 2016). A reflective journal is critical to generating theory from one’s own practice. Reflection is the underlying principal of self-study action research. The method adopted for recording observations and reflections for this project is Gibbs’ cycle of reflection (See figure 3.2) which he says is “Built from Kolb’s experiential learning cycle, it proposes that theory and practice enrich each other in a never-ending circle”(Finlay, 2008:8).

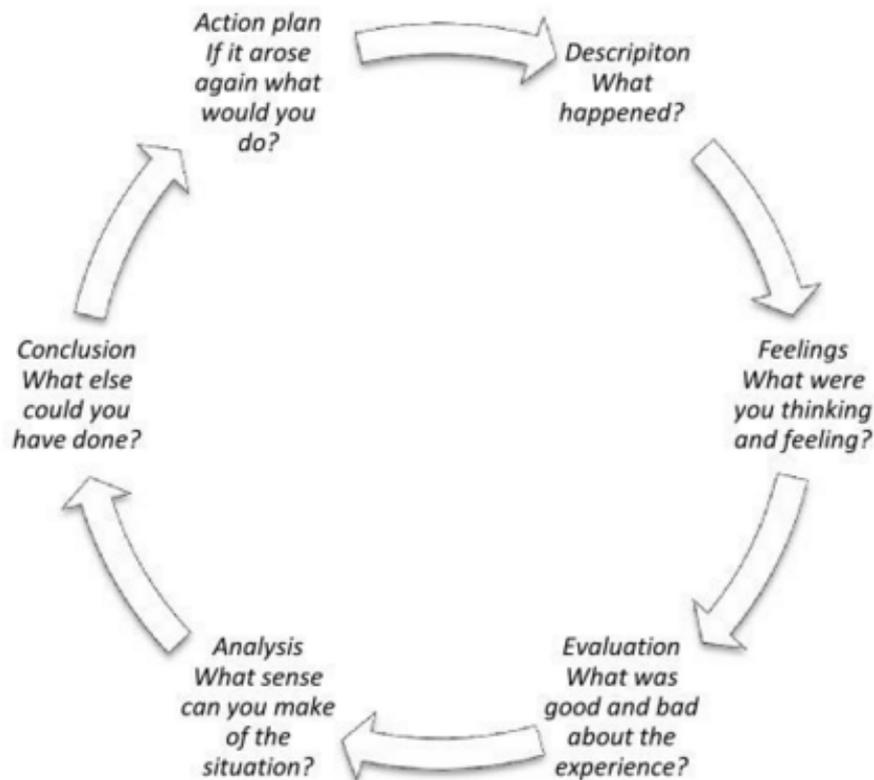


Figure 3.2

The cyclical process espoused by Finlay (2008) involves describing the event, noting one’s feelings about the given event, evaluating the experience, analyzing the situation, drawing a conclusion of what else one could have done and finally creating an action plan (Finlay, 2008). In the beginning of this Master’s programme I found it difficult to reflect effectively; I wrote my reflections in a descriptive manner and they followed little structure. Once introduced to Gibbs cycle of reflection it acted as a clear step-by-step affective and practical method of reflection. I am now cognisant of the importance of reflection on action and even more so the importance of meta-reflection. The meta-thinking process acts as a mechanism for reflective educators to review their “decision-making process to reorder or to put the pieces together in a new way” (Ferry and Ross-Gordon, 1998). The reflective journal as a methodological tool for this project generated a large segment of the data corpus. Without it there would be a dearth of information gathered.

3.5.3 Critical Friend

Self-study action research has particular characteristics and one of the main components is that it is collaborative. Self-study action research relies on dialogue and conversations developed with critical friends. The sole purpose of these friends for the researcher is to act as a guide, helping to critique one's work for the benefit of the research. Self-study action research is, as previously mentioned, rooted in one's values, which means that the student is studying his/herself as a teacher with the "view to becoming a better practitioner" (Sullivan et al, 2016:28). Therefore, it is imperative to have critical friends to ensure a comprehensive self-study and critical reflection. I ensured this by forming a group of critical friends in my college class; we met fortnightly to discuss the progress of our projects and sought opinions or clarification on issues arising from our studies. My other critical friend was a partner teacher; this teacher was a great benefit to both myself and this project as she acted as a critical party to the lessons and outcomes.

3.5.4 Questionnaires

To collect baseline data I used an established wellbeing self-assessment (Farmouth University, 2006). This scale is akin to The Warwick-Edinburgh Well-Being Scale, which has been validated for use with students (16+). The Farmouth University (2006) wellbeing scale is presented as a five-point Likert Scale and aims to measure the wellbeing of a child. See figure 3.3 and 3.4 for details.

Statement	None of the time	Rarely	Some of the time	Often	All of the time
I've been feeling optimistic about the future	1	2	3	4	5

Figure 3.3

This scale shown above in figure 3.3 is not the age appropriate bracket for the participants in this project and so I have adapted the scale by using similar questions written in more comprehensible language. There are also less vague answers to ensure full understanding of the task in this instance. See figure 3.4 for details. (See Appendix D for further detail).

Statement	None of the time	Some of the time	All of the time
I have been feeling excited about the future	1	2	3

Figure 3.4

I chose to deviate from dichotomous questions and add an extra layer as I think the area of wellbeing is not easily analysed through yes or no answers. Therefore, I asked the children to write down one emotion they feel prior to and post yoga class, in order to gauge the effects of the intervention used.

3.5.5 Interviews

From the outset of this project I was reluctant to conduct interviews as the project was being conducted over a short period and interviews may have been a time-consuming process. On reflection, this concern was unfounded. Having reflected over cycle one of the project, I am finding it difficult to generate enough data from my observations.

On foot of a conversation with both my supervisor and my critical friend I felt it necessary to interview the participants. Interviewing the participants would demonstrate understanding and highlight the children's interpretations of the projects aims. In essence an interview is "not simply concerned with collecting data about life; it is part of life itself, its human embeddedness is inescapable" (Cohen et al, 2018:349). The order of the interviews was to be controlled, a three person conversation was to be initiated with the intention of gathering information. When interviewing children it is advised to do so in groups as it is less intimidating (Cohen et al, 2018). There is a clear power dynamic between teacher and student and therefore I intended to conduct the interview with two students in a relaxed and natural way. I incorporated the interview into my daily routine and used it as an activity as opposed to an isolated and clinical situation.

3.6 The rationale for Action Research

Action research has stemmed from critical theory (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011). Critical theory is linked to how a question can be understood. Action research goes beyond this and tackles the question on how something can be changed (McNiff and Whitehead, cited in Sullivan et al, 2016:27). Action research follows a cyclical process of observation, description, planning, acting, reflecting, evaluating and modifying (McNiff, 2002). See figure 3.5.

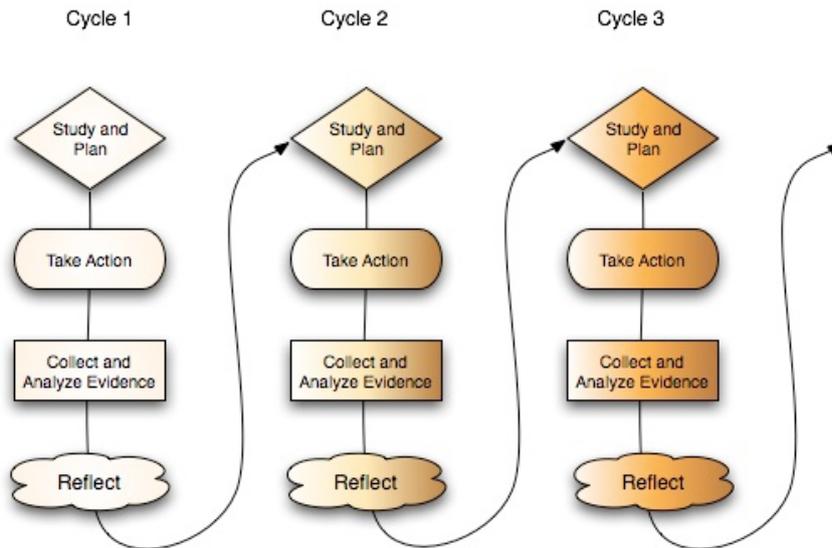


Figure 3.5

A possible criticism of action research is its lack of academic rigor required to qualify as a research methodology (Lochmiller and Lester, 2017). It is believed that action research is “firmly planted in the world of practice and this is not adequately concerned with the generation of new educational theories” (Lochmiller and Lester, 2017:237). However, in their book, *Doing Practitioner Research Differently*, Dadds and Hart argue the point that there is “tension between accepted methods of research” (Dadds and Hart, 2002:143). Academia delves into the “personal, academic and professional” (Dadds and Hart, 2002:144), factors that come into play when deciding upon methodologies. It is highly recommended to utilise a range of methodologies as it adds depth to research (Dadds and Hart, 2002, Gelade, 2005). Action research, which is a cyclical process, is grounded in qualitative research. However, it does lend itself on occasion to a quantitative approach (Lochmiller and Lester, 2017). It is clear that the researcher conducting both the traditional style of research and an action research project would have equal considerations with regards to developing coherent questions, choosing a suitable methodology as well as choosing an analytic approach.

3.7 *The participants of this project*

This research will be completed within a DEIS 1 primary school. DEIS is an acronym for Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools which has been explained in chapter one. The site for this research is a mixed gender school with 228 children. Following the Belmont idea of justice (Sullivan et al, 2016) I have selected my participants without any bias. Fourteen children from second class agreed to consent to participate in the research (See Appendix C). Participants were selected as a result of the class I am assigned to teach. The research group comprises of five boys and nine girls. They were given pseudonyms and there were strict ethical guidelines adhered to which will be discussed in further detail within this chapter. There are many ethnic groups in the class. There are individuals from the travelling community, a child in foster care, two children with significant emotional needs and participants that have English as an additional language. See figure 3.6 for further details.

GIRLS	BOYS
Rachel – Significant emotional needs	Don – English as an additional language
Mary	Adam - English as an additional language
Molly	Colin – In foster Care/ Significant emotional needs
Ellie	Max
Zoe	Alan
Sarah	
Ann – A member of the travelling community	
Linda – A member of the travelling community	
Sophie – A significantly troubled family life.	

Figure 3.6

3.8 Gatekeepers to this research

A “gatekeeper” is the term used “to describe the phenomenon of adults mediating the relationship between children and researchers” (Collings & Susan, 2016: 500). An additional gatekeeper to research, particularly when children are involved, are typically employees of the government and social services (Hodd et al, 1996). It was imperative to identify all potential gatekeepers at the beginning of this project. Once identified I began the process of explaining the intentions of my research to all the gatekeepers. Researchers have ethical obligations and asking for consent holds “clarificatory value” (Bell, 2003:40). I had an informal conversation about my project with the school principal, whom I identified as a gatekeeper. I then wrote a letter to the Board of Management seeking permission to conduct the project (See Appendix A). Having gained permission to proceed from the board, I sent a letter to the parents of my participants detailing the objectives of the project (See Appendix B). I felt obligated to share the intentions of the project with the participants and explicitly explored the concept of the project with them. When the participants had a clear understanding of what was being asked of them, I asked them for written consent which was received and stored safely (See Appendix C).

3.9 Research Ethics

Researchers conducting action research must be especially sensitive and show a constant personal respect towards participants (Cohen et al, 2018). The participants of this project are between the ages of seven and eight years. From a child safeguarding and protection perspective it was critical to be sensitive and mindful throughout the period of the research. When conducting an action research project it is essential to be aware that it is the researcher’s responsibility to protect the rights of each participant,

to ensure that all information gathered and published is accurate and finally to protect individuals rights (Sullivan et al, 2016). The researcher is accountable for his/her adherence to Child Protection Guidelines as well as the University of Maynooth's code of ethics. There are many other elements that must be considered. These include:

- **Vulnerability:**I adhered and honoured the UN Declaration of the Rights of a Child 1959; similar to the Children First Guidelines (2015) which state that education available to pupils must meet their individual needs and abilities. I carefully observed all of my participants to reduce any possible discomfort or harm throughout my project.
- **Power Dynamics:** To avoid the natural imbalance of power dynamics within this research project. I refused to view the participants as “passive receptors” (Broch 2014:13, cited in Sullivan et al, 2016). I treated each participant with respect; viewing each child as an individual learner. Each participant had the option to opt in or out of the study and I stressed that there would be no reward or punishment for their decision. With respect to my working community, I sought permission and help from colleagues to work collaboratively; in this way we continued to build on our existing honest and open relationship.
- **Data Storage:** I am aware that children and their parents have rights that need to be protected under Data Protection Acts (Government of Ireland 2018). When collecting data, I used the minimum amount of personal information. When writing about my participants I used pseudonyms and ensured that all the data collected would be accessible only to me. Data collected is stored in a secure location with password protection on electronic devices.

- **Sensitivity:** Joe Kincheloe (1991) came to the conclusion that in order to give children a fair opportunity to learn, the teacher must critically reflect on the context of each child and the working environment of practice. This project is based on a child's mindset and outlook. There are external factors which may influence the results. There are a number of children who come from unstable family backgrounds and they can, at times, be tired and emotionally impacted as a result of their home lives. This is a core limitation of the study. Emer Smyth (2016) writes about the social, cultural and economic struggles Irish children have because of the circumstances of their family background. Attitudes, such as perceptions of school, and developmental matters such as language skills stem from social class and levels of education (Williams et al, 2016). A key finding in Symth's research describes the skills needed to engage adequately in school. These vary in accordance with a mother's perceptions of school, language levels, migrant status, household income and cognitive skills prior to entering school (Williams et al, 2016). As previously stated, the participants of this research fall into this category having implications for this project. Working in a challenging context such as one found typically in a DEIS 1 school does cause limitations to the project. In order to overcome perceptions, language barriers and lack of engagement it is necessary to approach each participant and their parents with a great deal of sensitivity. One of the significant critiques of reflective practice involves the lack of clarity regarding context (Kinsella, 2004). I will ensure that this study includes all detail of context to ensure an honest and clear depiction of the data.

3.10 Project Structure

This study took place over an eight-week period, split into two cycles (See figure 3.7). I followed *The Growth Mindset Coach Book*, a guide for teachers. I drew upon elements of this book and adapted aspects of it in order to structure the overall project.

3.11 Project overview

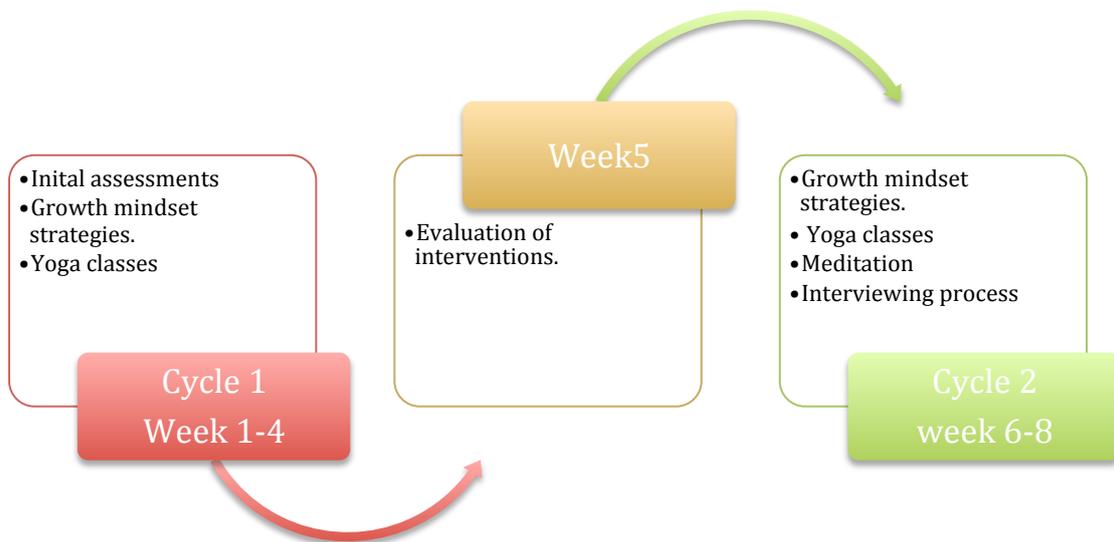


Figure 3.7

3.12 Mantras (breakdown of week 1-8)

Each week a new mantra is presented as a focus for the children. (See Figure 3.7) This mantra is explicitly taught and encouraged throughout the week. The mantra is used with the intentions of strengthening a growth mindset in the classroom. Growth mindset is practiced in connection with a strong pedagogy to be taken together with the robust Irish curriculum; it does not replace it. (See Figure 3.8 for further details).

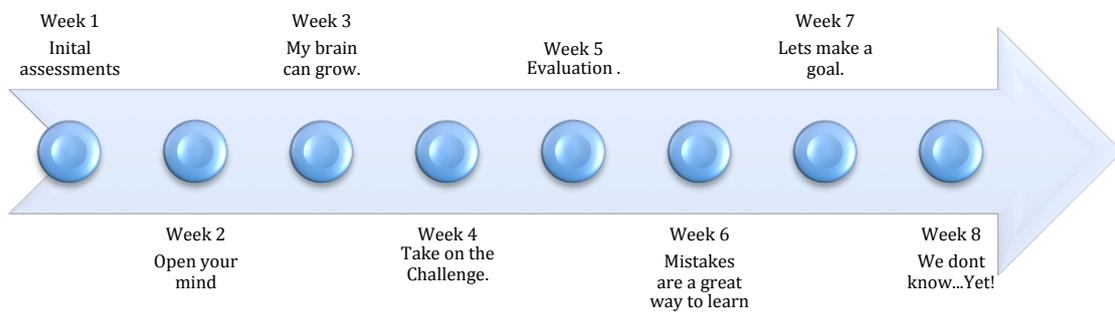


Figure 3.8

Week One

The primary focus of the first week was to assess each child on their level of awareness/knowledge about the study focus. Two assessments were undertaken. Initial assessments acted as baseline data and a point of reference for the purposes of comparison at the end of the project. The first test was a self-assessment mindset quiz. The children were presented with a number of statements to decide if they were true or false. The odd numbered statements on the quiz characterised a fixed mindset and the even characterised a growth mindset (See Appendix E). This gave a clear indication of the children’s mindsets from the outset of the project. During this week the participants also completed the wellbeing self-assessment as previously outlined in this chapter.

The children participated in their first yoga class with an external yoga teacher in week 1. Prior to the yoga session I asked the children to write down one emotion that

they were feeling. After the yoga they were asked again to record how they felt; I used this as a guide to ascertain the impact that yoga has on their emotionally wellbeing.



Figure 3.9

Week Two

The mantra shared with the participants:

“Open your mind”.

Once I had gained a greater insight into the children’s mindsets I explicitly taught about mindsets and explained to the participants that the classroom would become a zone for building a growth mindset. Carol Dweck (2017) often emphasised the need to engage with students throughout the learning process in order to foster growth. David Paunesku published an article (2015) highlighting mindset training as a tool to increase a student’s motivation. Paunesku studied two different interventions. The first was a sense of purpose intervention, which helped students realise the importance education plays in achieving goals. The second intervention was a mindset intervention. This was a specifically taught lesson on growth and fixed mindset. The

children who received both interventions showed a clear improvement to their overall test results suggesting a correlation between academic achievements and mindset training (Paunesku et al, 2015; Brock & Hundley, 2016).

Using the Paunesku (2015) study as a catalyst, I provided a clear definition of both fixed and growth mindset to the participants. I gave a set of fixed and a set of growth mindset phrases in pairs. The students were required to separate them into the category in which each belongs (See Figure, 3.10). Having completed this exercise throughout the week I continued to focus on the concept and made frequent reference to the growth mindset concept.

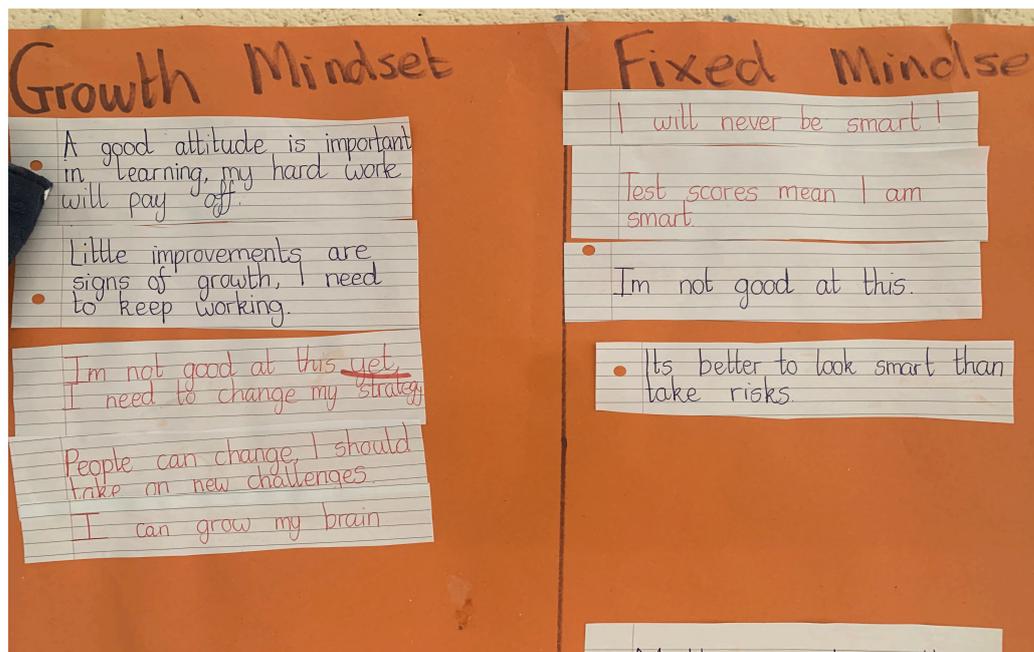


Figure 3.10

The children participated in their second yoga class with an external yoga teacher. Prior to the yoga, once again, I asked the children to write down one emotion that they were feeling. After the yoga they repeated the process. This exercise had the effect of creating a clear record of the impact that the yoga session may have on them

emotionally prior to and after each session. This offers some new information on the participant's sense of wellbeing and their emotional states.

Week Three

This week's mantra will be:

“My brain can grow”

“New research published revealed that humans, with dedicated effort and practice are capable of making incredible long-lasting changes to the brain throughout our lifetime.” (Eagleman, 2015; cited in Brock & Hundley, 2016:55)”

A Journal of Neuroscience article (2012) (Cited in Brock & Hundley, 2016) focused on people born with a hearing difficulty. It concluded that children who are born deaf retrained their brains to utilise their other senses such as touch and vision in order to compensate for the loss of hearing. As a part of the study *My brain as a muscle that grows* was a lesson which was taught during science, elaborating on the different parts of the brain and their functions. The focus of the lesson is to emphasis to the children that it is possible to grow the brain and that although the idea of intelligence is abstract, it is not stagnant. In so doing I aimed to empower learners to take on challenges (Brock & Hundley, 2016; Eagleman 2015 and Boaler, 2016; Dweck, 2017).

The children participated in the third yoga class with an external yoga teacher. Like the previous week the children repeated the process of recording emotions experienced both before and after the session.

Week Four

The mantra for week four

“Take on the challenge”

The objective of this week was to develop a clear understanding between equity and equality. I utilised an image to have a class discussion about the meaning of both words. (See Figure 3.11 for details)

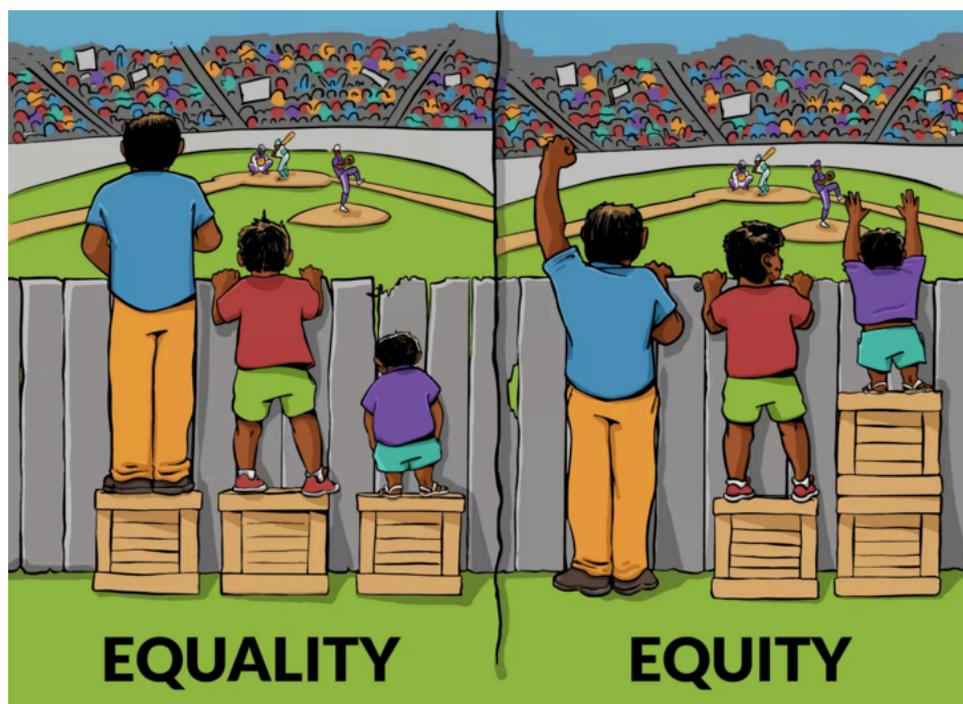


Figure 3.11

The question “Should equity be used in the classroom?” is explored in week four. I emphasised to the children that every student is treated equally as each student has the same books, tools and support every day (Brock & Hundley, 2016). However, it is the teacher’s role to establish the different needs of each child. Dweck (2017) suggests that “people with a growth mindset find a sense of success in learning and improving,” and that they “derive just as much happiness from the progress as from the result” (Dweck, 2017:98). Bearing in mind that the core aim of this project was to create positive learning opportunities for children, setting the participants challenging

work had the effect of instilling a joy of discovery and therefore an opportunity to learn. Over the course of Week Four the participants were introduced to ten's and unit's subtraction. The participants are taught as a whole group step by step. The children in the beginning are all using the same worksheet with a notation tens and unit board beside each sum. Once the children feel comfortable they will be given the choice to take on the challenge. The next worksheet does not have any notation board beside the sums. When the children are able to complete this they have the opportunity to take on another challenge and opt for a worksheet with both a mixed set of subtraction sums, some with renaming and some without. To give the children the choice and allowing them to choose the level they feel comfortable working in enables them to work at their own pace and urges them to utilise their growth mindsets.

Like the previous yoga classes with an external yoga teacher, I asked the children to write down one emotion that they felt prior to the yoga and again after the yoga to record this. This approach was to endeavour to create a clear record of the impact that yoga may have on them emotionally.

Week Five

The systematic cycle of inquiry is essential to the action research cycle (Lochmiller and Lester, 2017). I used week five as a time to review, evaluate and consider what may need to be altered to ensure the cycle of enquiry was addressed. Having had the time to reflect on the findings, I came to the conclusion that the data collected was too vague. When the children wrote down an emotion they felt before and after the yoga class it lacked explanation. Further to discussion with my supervisor she suggested

interviews as an additional layer to augment the original data collection intentions. For the purpose of this qualitative research project, the use of interviews provided a greater insight into the children's minds. Conducting the interviews proved to be time-consuming. Yet it generated raw data from the children and insured validity that the concepts of this study were being understood. A positive self-affirmation was used in each yoga lesson. I adopted this affirmation into my daily teaching routine to reinforce the importance of the meaning it carried.

*"I am amazing,
I am important,
I am enough,
Why?
Not because what I do,
Or because of what I say,
Or because of what I have,
Just because I am me."*

This to me was the most beautiful affirmation that the children could say to themselves. It assured them that they are enough and important. I was moved by the empowering effect it could potentially give the children in my class. It is something I will adopt into my daily routine. (Brannock, 22/01/2019).

I also introduced mindfulness meditation every day after the children's lunch break as an extra form of analysing the effects of the intervention in tandem with the yoga session. The yoga was having clear benefits to the children's wellbeing. However, it was only a one-hour session a week. I adopted meditation to ensure the children were having five to seven minutes of reflection each day.

Week Six

The mantra for week six:

“Mistakes are a great way to learn.”

The objective for this week was to normalise mistakes and realise that mistakes are an opportunity to learn. A person with a growth mindset views “setbacks motivating. They’re informative. They’re a wake-up call” (Dweck, 2017:99). I will introduce the concept by recalling famous mistakes that led to great discoveries (the microwave and ice-cream cones). I must counter the interpretation of failure and teach the participants that any feelings of failure that they experience is temporary. The children's mistakes act as a catalyst for learning, moving away from the traditional state of helplessness towards viewing mistakes as an opportunity. This indirectly teaches children the skills of optimism, cultivating “confidence in our ability to think and to cope with the basic challenges of life” (Seligman et al, 2007:32).

To debunk the belief that mistakes are ‘bad’, I employed the following strategies:

- Peer learning to promote collaborative working.
- Setting up a “Marvellous Mistakes” notice board (see Figure 3.12).

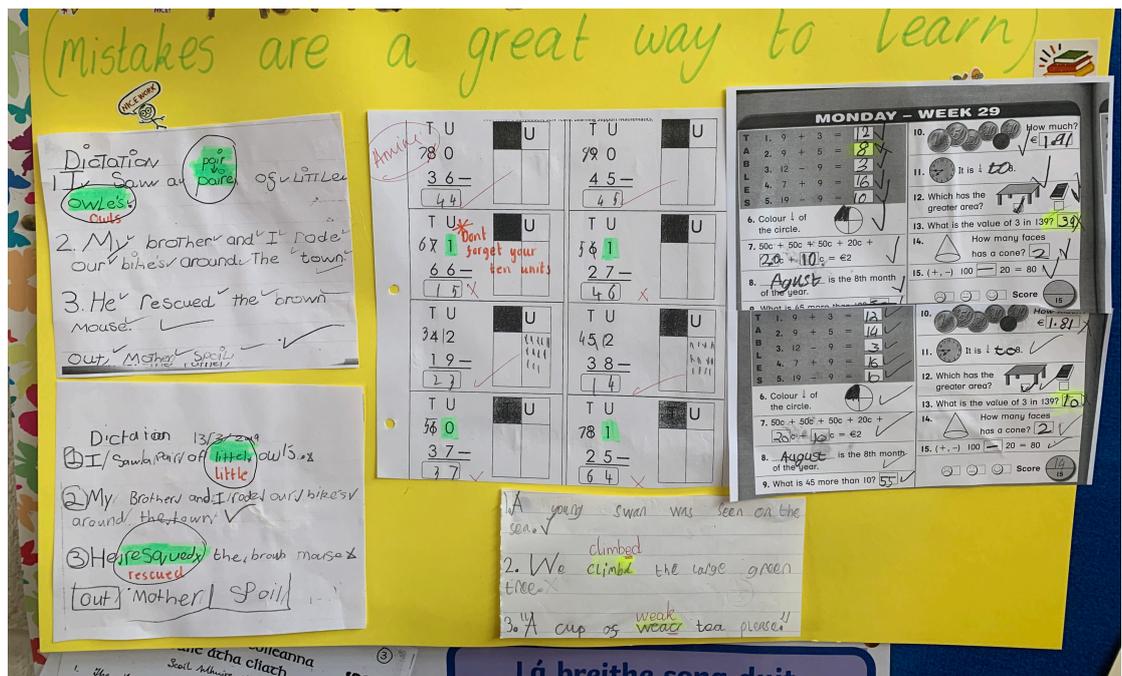


Figure 3.12

- This will highlight work that followed great structure yet failed to meet the result because, for example, a participant followed the new subtraction methods yet forgot to rename the ten.

The aim of implementing these strategies is to “normalise mistakes and demonstrate important metacognitive strategies in thinking through problems” (Brock & Hundley, 2016:150).

The children were calm and relaxed after yoga. However, yoga only took place for an hour a week. When reflecting I set out to rectify this situation. During week six I began utilising *self-affirmation* at the beginning of each day and meditation every day after the children’s first break.

Week Seven

“Let’s make a goal.”

The aim this week was to urge the children to make a goal; to have something to work towards. Aubrey Steinbrink introduced growth mindset into her classroom and her experiences with the concept augmented Dweck’s theory. In Week Seven the children looked at a famous celebrity or sporting person. They began to understand how they trained and set goals in order to achieve their successes. Each student made a personal learning goal to work towards over the course of the year. This was not a performance test but for working towards something that they may eventually overcome. (See Figure 3.13, 3.14) (See Appendix E for further detail).

I haven't reached this goal
yet!

I want to

learn to read tricky words.

My deadline for this is JUNE.

The things I need to do this

are lots of dyslexia books.

Things that may stop me

are playing with my dog.

I will overcome this

by to tell my mum to get the
dog out of the room.

Figure 3.13

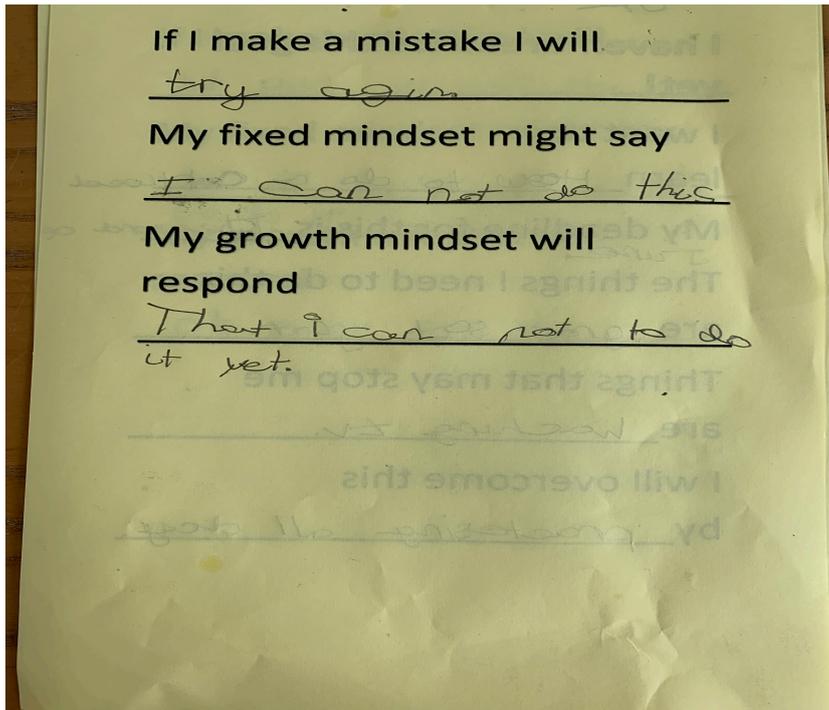


Figure 3.14

I continued utilising the self-affirmation at the beginning of each day and meditation took place after the children's first break.

Week Eight

“We don't know, YET!”

“Self-talk is critical to managing mindsets (Brock & Hundley, 2016:176)”. It is important to emphasise to children that everybody has both fixed and growth mindset traits and thoughts. In Week Eight I advocate using the word ‘yet’. I helped the children make a plan to tackle arising problems. Creating and utilising a plan cultivates a growth mindset when faced with failure and frustrations (Dweck, 2017). There are a number of factors that can change a person's mindset. Therefore having a plan in place most definitely promotes a growth mindset and it also promotes

perseverance. I continued utilising the self-affirmation at the beginning of each day and continued with meditation after the children's first break daily.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter details the findings of this study. The data collected in this project was obtained through the analysis of participants' voices gathered through questionnaires, interviews, empirical observation and journal entries. These different data types and sources were used concurrently in order to collectively provide a credible response to the central question posed. The beginning of this chapter justifies the chosen methods of data analysis methodology used and describes how I categorised my findings into codes. This allowed for the identification of emerging themes. The discovery of these themes acted as the catalyst for the development of key findings. The findings will be explored in detail within this chapter. There are three key findings:

1. The benefits of teaching growth mindset strategies to children.
2. The benefits yoga and meditation have on children.
3. The sense of achievement and happiness the participants experienced.

These findings are unpacked into further detailed subsections whereby they are discussed and explored.

4.2 Data Analysis

The overarching aim of the project was to produce sound, ethical, theoretical and methodological data. As a result of the data collection processes and tools (observations, reflective journals, questionnaires and interviews) used during this project I chose to use a combination of methods when analysing the collected data to ensure validity. The methods used were thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013) and voice centred relational methods (Byrne et al, 2009). Thematic analysis was used primarily to add structure to the data. It was a straightforward mechanism employed

to filter through field notes and questionnaires. Voice-centred relational methods approach (Byrne et al, 2009) was used to interpret the interviews. The benefit of this approach stems from the fact that it allows all participants' voices to be heard giving depth to the data collected. Utilising both methods of data analysis also ensured that there was care and justice shown to each participant (Byrne et al, 2009).

4.3 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative analytic method (Braun and Clark, 2013). Identifying themes can be viewed as a skill within qualitative research. Thematic coding is related to grounded theory, yet it takes a more flexible approach and thus provides a rich and detailed account of the data collected (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Cohen et al, 2018). Thematic coding is ultimately “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2013:6). Although this is a flexible method, there are guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013) that ensure thematic analysis is executed correctly. An important aspect of thematic analysis is to ensure that a theme captures an ongoing pattern within the data. Once the researcher identifies the themes it is an ongoing process of rereading, meta-analysis, coding and writing. The steps I took when analysing my data are outlined in Figure 4.1.

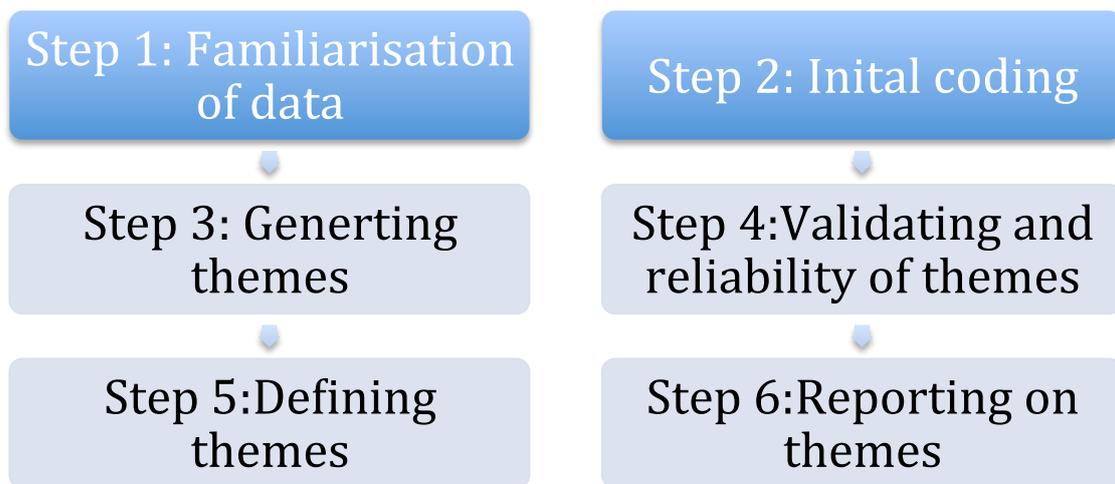


Figure 4.1

1. I became familiar with the text by immersing myself in the data corpus. It was an integral stage of data analysis to simply familiarise myself with everything collected. I transcribed all the interviews I had conducted. While it was a tedious task, it ensured familiarisation with the data.

2. Creating codes: Having gained a greater understanding of the data collected, I then began to mark initial codes. These codes are of significant interest to a researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Coding was initially broad and there were several different codes created. It was through meta-reflection that these codes were amalgamated or cut as a result of any significance they held. When I had a solid (adequate/sufficient) number of codes it led me to the next step.

3. Creating themes: Having identified all possible codes, these were grouped and eventually categorised. Three significant themes arose from this process.

4. As themes became apparent, it was essential to review them. To ensure that the themes held significance within this project I reread all the codes I had given to each theme, evaluating the coherence of the pattern that they revealed. Once

satisfied with the themes it was important to relate them to the overarching aim of the project and to evaluate the relevance the themes held to the research question.

5. This penultimate step was again meta-reflection; it involved rereading my notes, analysing the established themes, refining them once more and adding a deeper definition to them. Finally, I could clearly identify what the themes meant.

6. This final step led to writing this analysis chapter, pinning down all the ideas and highlighting the information that emerged throughout this action research project data analysis process.

4.4 Voice Centred Relational Method

The voice-centred relational method (Byrne et al, 2009) was used in tandem with thematic analysis. Unlike thematic analysis, the voice-centred method is based less on psychology but looks more at the sociological perspective (Byrne et al, 2009). As a consequence, I utilised this method for the interviews alone. Because of time constrictions of this project this method would allow for a more focused and detailed examination of the interviews. Ideally, it could be used across my data corpus, However, this was not feasible. Akin to thematic analysis, voice-centred relational method follows a step-by-step process. Mauthner and Doucts (1998) encourage four to five readings of the data, which, in this case, are the interviews (See Figure 4.2).

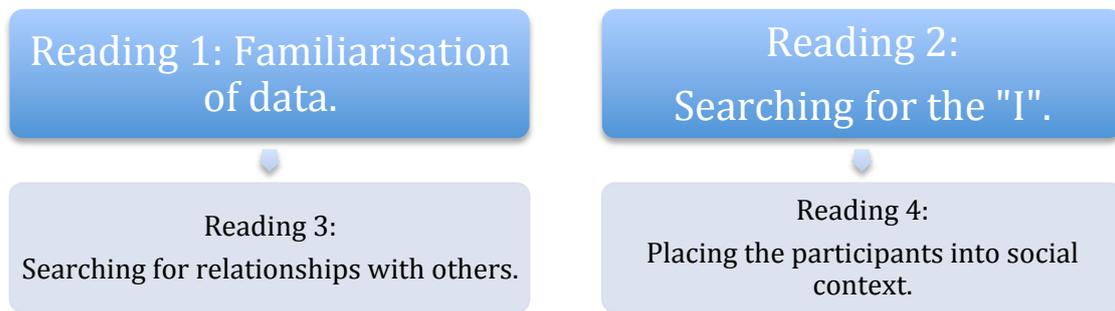


Figure 4.2

4.4.1 The step by step account of the data analysis utilising the voice centred analysis

1. The first reading was similar to that of thematic analysis as it involved rereading and listening to the interviews. The aim of this step is to become familiar with the data on a deeper level, becoming a part of the interview, listening to the participant’s answers, analysing their emotions and attempting to position oneself within the social context (Byrne et al, 2009). It is imperative to be aware of the social situation of the participants to ensure social justice. I realised this during this step as I reread the interviews and a participant exclaimed that she felt very relaxed after yoga and meditation but

“I wouldn’t feel comfortable alone doing it, I think it’s important in school” (Rachel, 2019).

This reinforced the importance of being cognisant of the DEIS 1 context where this study was being conducted.

2. The second reading hones in on the speaker and how they utilised the word “I”. This step is important as it explains, “how the narrator speaks about herself or himself, attuning the listener/reader to the narrator’s sense of agency

and social location” (Byrne et al, 2009:69). For example, Rachel spoke about the occasions in school when she used a growth mindset,

“When I start crying, when I am confused, people just keep telling me to take on the challenge ‘you got this!’. And I then take on the challenge and I probably get my test all right or some wrong” (Rachel, 2019).

3. When reading the interviews for the second time, it was obvious that Rachel had feelings of frustration and this transcript highlights that utilising growth mindset strategies helped participants. However, the problems that Rachel speaks about are natural and will reoccur; but emerging evidence suggests she is becoming equipped to tackle these challenges.

4. The third reading of the interviews focuses on how the participants speak about their relationships with others and what implications these relationships may have. For example, when interviewing Mary she speaks about her life at home and how she utilises her growth mindset. She also articulates that she understands the marvellous mistakes concept.

“Maybe baking sometimes when your helping your mam and you mess it up and it goes bad you actually learn.” (Mary, 2019)

Mary is clearly making the connections between the strategies taught in school and interpreting situations in a different light. The fact that she is able to articulate the benefit of the mistake made highlights that her thinking may have been shared with her mother.

5. The fourth reading examines data in a deeper manner than the third as it involves placing the participants of the project into specific social contexts. The benefit of the last two steps to this project was to analyse any impact this project may have had on the participants. On the fourth reading it became evident that the participants were utilising the growth mindset strategies they had learned outside of school in their wider social world.

“No, you could use it playing GAA, or reading or colouring” (Alan, 2019).

The fourth reading acted as a window into the participant’s life outside of the project.

4.5 Rationale of Method of Data Analysis

I chose to use the voice-centred relational method of data analysis and thematic analytical approach as it aligned with my core value of care and social justice. Analysing interviews in this manner gave the voice of each individual attention and care. A combination of both methods of data analysis enabled the core context of the project to be taken into consideration ensuring that it would be ethical and just.

While reading the interviews and going through the four stages I made notes and coded them using different colours. Once I had gone through the four readings recurring patterns emerged. This led to the formation of themes that mirrored the trends that developed during the thematic analysis.

4.6 Emerging Themes

The major findings of this project are in relation to growth mindset, the benefits of yoga and meditation and the sense of achievement children received. These themes

formed the significant core findings. The themes are broad yet are broken into three subsections and will be unpacked below to ensure validity and understanding.

4.6.1 *Benefits of Teaching Growth Mindset Strategies*

The benefit of teaching growth mindset strategies to children is a prevalent theme that emerged throughout the findings of this project. This theme can be further deconstructed into three sub themes, all supporting the finding that there is merit in mindset interventions.

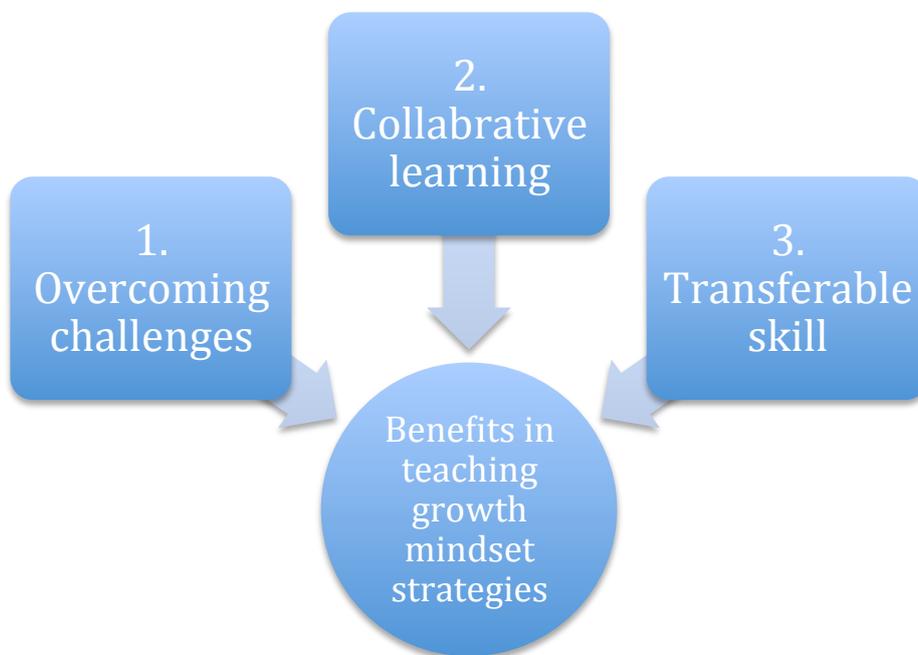


Figure 4.3

1. Overcoming challenges

A core aim of this study was to provide children with strategies to overcome challenges in a positive manner and cultivate a classroom with a growth mindset. The participants gained a clear understanding of the growth mindset concept; this is evident in these definitions provided by Zoe (2019), Max (2019) and Rachel (2019).

“A growth mindset is when you take on the challenge and when you never give up. A fixed mindset is when you can think you can never do it ever and never take on the challenge” (Zoe, 2019).

“If you have a fixed mindset you think you can never do anything but a growth mindset you take on the challenge and you think you are really good at it” (Max, 2019).

“A growth mindset is where you take on the challenge and a fixed mindset is where you don’t take on the challenge. You’re like ‘ahhhhh’ I can’t do this and I can’t do that and this is just not my thing.” (Rachel, 2019).

Having established a clear understanding of the concept, the participants were able to apply this mentality to their own work and it became a part of the children’s vernacular. It also encouraged the children to persevere with work when they found it challenging. A recent article disputed the idea that growth mindset interventions are far from the elixir of student learning that many claim it is today (Hendrick, 2019). The paper from Hendrick (2019) argues that growth mindset has disrupted the general flow of a classroom. While he supports the philosophy of a growth mindset, he argues that it is a redundant intervention. Hendrick (2019) states that growth mindset interventions in the classroom place importance on motivational posters and thus deludes children as to what success truly means. Some suggested solutions to avoiding such mishaps are to “not mention growth mindset at all” (Hendrick, 2019:9) and to focus on concrete skills such as “effective introduction to an essay” (Hendrick, 2019:9) among others. Similarly, Yeager & Walton (2011) argue that brief

interventions may act as fleeting magical moments but could not be considered to promote educational reform. This argument has merit if a teacher utilises growth mindset interventions by giving children a false sense of what intelligence is. In this instance it could become confusing and result in children having a false sense of achievement. However, in my practice, I took care to avoid such a misstep by implementing structured interventions, allowing the children to work at their own pace and towards their individual goals. My observations encouraged me to conclude that Hendrick is overly pessimistic. The children in my group became familiar with the concept; they internalised it but also recognised that it was part of a broader learning strategy.

Moreover, in this instance the interventions employed were structured, explained and continued. The children were praised for purposeful effort, there was a response given to errors and setbacks. It became increasingly evident as the weeks went on that the children were no longer shying away from challenging work. They were also able to recognise when they were struggling.

When reading a text about a boy who gave up skateboarding, Rachel offered her opinion. She identified that the boy in the story was using his fixed mindset and he was being very negative. This led to a class discussion; the children believed the protagonist in the story needed to open his mind, practice and try again. Furthermore, in Week Seven of the intervention, the participants recorded a goal that they would work towards. They began to identify problems in their own lives and to work out their own strategies to overcome them.

I haven't reached this goal
yet!

I want to
learn how to read. Better

My deadline for this is June

The things I need to do this
are Practis footBall

Things that may stop me
are People who are distracting me

I will overcome this
by tell them to stop

If I make a mistake I will
Fix them

My fixed mindset might say
I will never learn

My growth mindset will
respond
you can do it

Figure 4.4 and 4.5

In the above images (Figure 4.4 and 4.5) it is clear that the participants have the ability to identify the problems that may occur when attempting to reach certain goals.

This highlights that directly teaching growth mindset strategies helps children to overcome obstacles.

A new perspective on mistakes

In Week One of the interventions the children were given a growth mindset assessment (Brock & Hundley, 2016) used to gather baseline data. It was a self-assessment quiz. The children were required to circle true or false having read each statement. Thirteen children took the test; one was absent on the day of administration. Six children circled true for the following statement. When I make a mistake, I get embarrassed. In Week Three and Four of the interventions a clear shift in the children's confidence became apparent. Having introduced the mantras take on the challenge and marvellous mistakes, masterful action (Seligman, 2007) began to unfold within the classroom. 'Masterful action', is a phrase coined by Martin Seligman, "making a habit of persisting in the face of challenge and overcoming obstacles" (Seligman et al, 2007:12). In this project, when growth mindset interventions were introduced with purpose, it allowed for masterful action to occur which was made clear in these quotes:

"We learned that mistakes are very marvellous and that you can learn from them."

(Zoe, 2019)

"I have a growth mindset because I always take on the challenge". (Ellie, 2019)

"I think I have a growth because when you get something wrong you can try do it again. When you make mistakes you learn from your mistakes." (Marie, 2019)

With this new perception, the interpretation of failure began to change and space became available for constant practice and improvement. It is the role of the parent,

coach or teacher to ensure that children are not led into a state of helplessness (Seligman, 2007). This is a state of mind forged as a result of everything being carried out for a child, denying the opportunity and joy of discovery. Dweck (2017) states that people with a growth mindset find a sense of success in learning and improving and it is clear in this study that children's attitude to making mistakes began to change. It is through clearly understanding what a growth mindset is, coupled with a shift of attitude towards mistakes and challenges, that cultivates a positive and motivated classroom environment. I am confident that as a result of the growth mindset interventions put in place over the course of this study that the objective of the project has been achieved. The data diminishes the critiques given by Hendrick (2019) and firmly highlights the benefits in growth mindset interventions.

2. Collaborative learning

Another interesting reoccurring trend emerged as a result of the growth mindset strategies introduced. As a result of directly being taught the concept of a growth mindset, the participants had a comprehensive understanding of the theory. Being equipped with this knowledge enabled the children to coach each other through problems or challenges. This is a significant finding as there is a dearth of research on this particular outcome. There has been little to no research highlighting the link between teaching mindset strategies and collaborative learning. This study however demonstrates that participants helped and encouraged one another,

“When I start crying when I am confused people just keep telling me to take on the challenge you got this. And I then take on the challenge and I probably get my test all right or some wrong but at least I'm going to improve right?” (Rachel, 2019)

A direct result from the growth mindset strategies was the evolution of peer learning and peer support. When the participants were first introduced to repeated subtraction there was a sense of camaraderie in the classroom. Collaborative learning is a positive experience for the children as it goes beyond the subject at hand; it incorporates social learning and exudes a kindness that cannot be directly taught (University of California Berkley, 2018). One child in particular was finding the work very challenging and his friend beside him told him to look at the problem in a different way. Subsequently the child made a counting frame on his page with tens and units, broke down the problem step by step, and declared that he needs to,

“look at the sum in a way you think is easy, don’t give up, take on the challenge and if you make a mistake, it’s marvellous”. (Chris, 2019)

This to me highlights the importance of explicitly teaching the mindset ideology to children. Despite what Hendrick’s (2019) views, I have found that there is merit in sharing the concept. If children were unaware of the theory, I do not believe they would have engaged with such perseverance nor would there have been such a collaborative approach taken by the students themselves.

Carol Dweck (2017) has expressed concerns about the misconception of growth mindset and worries that the theory is being misconstrued by being wrongly measured against the findings of the self-esteem movement (Hendrick, 2019). Dweck (2017) argues that a growth mindset is a tool for learning and a foundation for improvement. I concur with Dweck – my findings indicate that growth mindset theory when

appropriately applied is an important learning tool. In my class alone it is evident that children no longer shy away from challenges and there has been a direct improvement in the classroom environment, both socially and academically.

3. Transferable skills

As mentioned in Chapter Two my teaching philosophies stem from the work of Henry Giroux who acknowledged that self-empowerment and social empowerment of students goes beyond the politics of the classroom. Giroux also realised the significance of the social struggle outside of schools (Giroux, 1986). My epistemological value of social justice drives my work. I understand that the social, economic and political context that a child is born into has the potential to shape the way they view the world. When a teacher has a realisation of his/her identity within the particular teaching context there is often a “sense of agency, of empowerment to move ideas forward, to reach goals or even to transform the context” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009:83). I endeavoured to extend this feeling of empowerment to the children in my class. I acknowledge the contextual struggles the participants of this study endure. As a result of this project I do think that there has been a positive opportunity created. Having been taught about mindset as a whole the participants now have the ability to transfer these skills into their own communities and homes. The participants have been given a given a set of tools to which they can apply to their own lives and too many varied situations. When the participants were asked whether they think their growth mindsets are just for school, they answered,

“It can be good at home because if your playing a football match you have to believe in yourself you can win.” (Sarah, 2019)

“At home too, sometimes you are doing your homework and you say I can’t do it yet; I can’t do my joint writing yet. Maybe baking sometimes when your helping your mam and you mess it up and it goes bad you actually learn.” (Mary, 2019)

“No, you could use it playing GAA, or reading or colouring.” (Alan, 2019)

“Am no you can use it in jobs, in restaurants, in your work.” (Rachel, 2019)

I strongly believe that the participants in this study will be able to utilise growth mindset skills outside of school. The interventions deployed contain transferable skills, for example, overcoming challenges, understanding that mistakes are not futile, helping someone overcome a problem and working with another are facets of life that participants will encounter daily. These skills can be utilised at home, in secondary school, in work and throughout life. There is merit in teaching children the growth mindset skills at a young age due to its transferability across other aspects of life. Teachers have the ability to directly create these positive opportunities for children in their care and potentially prompt a change in mindset.

4.6.2 *Yoga and Meditation as a Positive Experience*

The mindset strategies employed in this study aimed to spur perseverance/interest in subjects, forge a new way of thinking and offer an alternative way to overcome challenges. Mindset interventions were one aspect of this project; the other aspect was the employment of yoga and meditation. Yoga and meditation are holistic systems that combine the body and the mind; they are practices that have been proven to

benefit both the physical and mental health of participants (Butzer et al, 2014). The adoption of yoga and meditation into the daily teaching in a classroom had the aim of creating a positive opportunity for participants to relax, develop more control over their emotions and aid concentration. The overall findings demonstrate that yoga and meditation is a positive experience for the participants. The data corpus of this project highlights the benefits that the combined skill set yoga and meditation can have on a child's overall wellbeing, the ability it has to help a child to regulate its emotions and its ability to act as a transferable skill. (See figure 4.6).

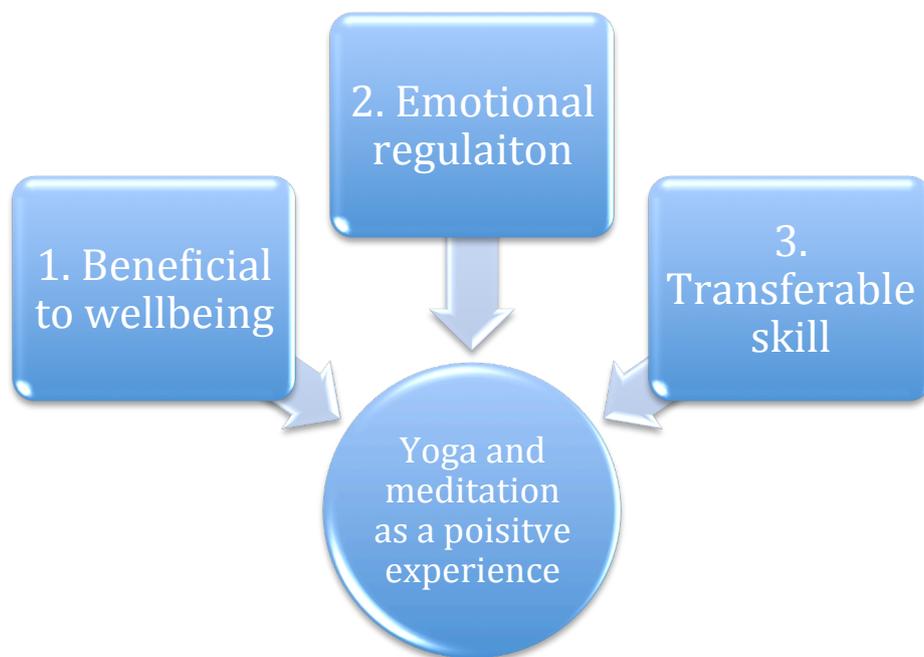


Figure 4.6

1. Benefits to wellbeing

Wellbeing is a topical subject in contemporary society and education. It is also an inherently difficult word to define, as it does not have a consistent meaning. “According to Amerijckx and Humblet (2014) this could be overcome by considering the role of context, because the concept of child wellbeing is context-specific by nature” (Tobia & Valentina, 2019:841). One of the prominent critiques of reflective

practice involves the lack of clarity regarding context (Kinsella, 2004). At all times I was keenly aware of the context in which I was working and adapted the parameters of my research to take context into account at all times. The participants in this project are largely from disadvantaged backgrounds. Five children arrive to school every day late and three significantly late averaging between 20 minutes up to an hour. This reflects the chaos of their morning routine and elements of that chaos continues throughout their entire day. School is a segment of the day that is consistent and stable for them. The participants in this study spend one third of their day in school, this implies that school has an impact on their wellbeing.

Impact of meditation to wellbeing

At the beginning of this project I was a living contradiction; I held myself accountable to value care, yet I found myself bonded to the robust Irish curriculum. I neglected to provide for the children in class any opportunities to reflect and relax. I set out to rectify this situation by introducing meditation every day. In my field notes I noted that when I began to implement meditation the children were uneasy and found it funny. They were unable to focus on their breathing and did not engage with it properly. I was utilising Gibbs' cycle of reflection. I learnt from this reaction and devised changes that I would make prior to the next meditation session. My notes reflected my thoughts: "give a lesson on the rules for meditation, need to set clear expectations, must separate some children" (Brannock, 2019). A study completed by Brian M. Galla and Angela Duckworth (2015), which explored the benefits of mediation for teenagers, also noted that participants found it inherently difficult at the beginning to fully engage. They made a valid point; though meditation has benefits to wellbeing, in order to meditate the participant themselves must have pre-existing self-

control. Meditation takes “grit, determination and discipline” (Galla and Duckworth, 2015). However, as a result of meditation becoming a part the classroom routine it became an integral part of the participant’s day. Having introduced this new structure it became a calming, relaxing break in each child’s day. It is evident below that the participants found mediation meditation an enjoyable and calming experience,

“Meditation is what we do when you come in from yard, if you’re all hyper you can put your head down and think about happy things and relax.” (Sarah, 2019)

“Its like to help people relax after yard when we are still a bit hyper after yard then we do a little bit of meditation and it tells you to close you eyes and imagine things.” (Zoe, 2019)

After every meditation session there is a general sense of calm that takes over the classroom. Arguments that followed from yard are forgotten and the participants are more relaxed. Meditation has been found to act as an active ingredient in constructing human wellbeing (Goleman and Riachards, 2017) and I believe my data supports this statement. The participants are given the opportunity to relax and any stressful situation that has occurred outside the classroom, is forgotten or paused. All energy is focused on breathing. I believe that the consistent practice of mediation meditation has had a profoundly positive effect on the children’s wellbeing.

Impact of yoga and positive self-talk on wellbeing

As discussed in Chapter Two, yoga and positive self-talk has been proven to have a profoundly positive effect on the children’s wellbeing (Hagen and Nyar, 2014; Butzer et al, 2014; Vorkapic, et al, 2015; Bazzano et al, 2018). This study concurs with

evidence suggesting benefits from the practice of yoga for wellbeing. This is an extract taken from field notes (Brannock, 2019),

When we walked into the hall, the mats were set up in a large circle with soothing music playing in the background, the children instinctively became quiet. They took off their shoes and found themselves a mat within the circle; a blanket of calmness came over the room. The arguments from yard had dissolved. I wondered was it the novelty of a new activity, a new teacher or maybe the soothing music?



(Figure, 4.7)

The lesson ended in the most amazing way: the children had to repeat what the yoga teacher said and copy the move she was doing.

“I am amazing,

I am important,

I am enough,

Why?

Not because what I do,

Or because of what I say

Or because of what I have

Just because I am me.” (Brannock, 2019)

On foot of this entry I began to introduce positive self-talk everyday whereby the children repeated the above affirmations daily. It is exceptionally important for every child, not just the children in this project, to be reassured that they are good enough. Yoga and meditation acted as a catalyst to promoting wellbeing within my classroom. One child explained that it gave her, “headspace”. I learned to prioritise a few minutes of the school day to allow the children time to reflect on themselves. I value care and to deny the children a moment of self-affirmation each day would be wrong. I, like many other teachers, got caught up in prioritising the incorporation of English, Maths and Gaelic into the working day and was guilty of neglecting the emotional needs of the children. In order to adhere to my values, I needed to look at the bigger picture

2. Emotional Regulation

I think it is important to broadcast research that demonstrates the benefits of a continuous practice of mindfulness that enables children to improve their ability to emotionally regulate (Lutz et al, 2010, cited in Flook, 2015). My findings correlate with this theory; this is an extract detailing Rachel’s reaction when disappointed she did not receive a prayer written as part of a reflective assignment in November 2018:

The child then began hysterically crying (this is a normal reaction when she is disappointed). She then growled at the children who had been given the prayers and began shouting “I would do a better job”, I attempted to continuously calm her down but the bell had rang and I had to let the class out. I opened the door to greet the parents, during this time; the child began to bang her hand against the wall aggressively. I knew I had to do something as I could see the potential of injury.

I knew that I could not let the child leave in such an emotional state. The child's mum collects her from the car park. I told her that I would walk with her to her mum. This caused even more aggravation; she took her bag off and threw it at me. I kept walking as I have learnt engaging with her during these fits of rage only cause more upset. When we reached her mum, she took off her coat threw it at her mum, kicked her bag and continued screaming at her mum and I.

(Brannock, 2018)

In April 2019 I posed the question to Rachel as to why she thinks we practice mindfulness and yoga in school?

“Yoga and mediation is to if your really excited and really angry to relieve stress, like to relieve all that stress and if your really ecstatic you put your head down focus on your breathing and listen to music and you take a nap and all that stress, anger and excitement will be out of you and you'll be just flowing free.” (Rachel, 2019)

In the data above the participant has explained that she was actively emotionally regulating as a result of mediation and yoga. Rachel's explanation clearly highlights her perspective and validates the assumption that meditation and yoga are aiding emotional regulation. I also asked other children why they thought we practiced meditation and yoga in school? These responses further strengthen the assumption that yoga and meditation acts as a key agent in emotional regulation.

“It's when you relax and if you're angry you can sit there and do it.” (Chris, 2019)

“If your really hyper you can do yoga and it will calm you down a bit “(Sarah, 2019)

The fact that the children (aged seven and eight) have the ability to explicitly explain the benefits further proves the importance of these practices within a classroom. The children also kept a log of how they felt before and after each yoga session. Here are some of the examples in figure 4.8.

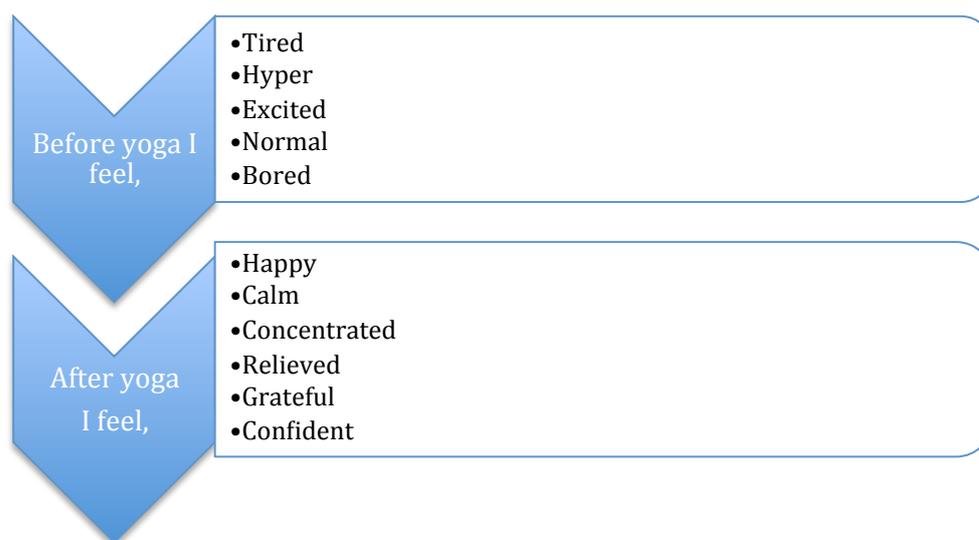


Figure 4.8

In my field notes evidence from children describe their yoga experience as:

“I had the greatest rest in the world teacher” (Chris, 2019)

“This is actually really good” (Adam, 2019)

“I really like coming here, it really fun” (Max, 2019)

The children clearly expressed enjoyment in the overall experience and it is evident in their answers as well as in their behavior throughout the yoga class. Practicing yoga has been linked directly to “emotional awareness and positive moods and disposition as characteristics of happiness” (Pandya, 2018). The above image is evidence to support this statement. It is obvious that there is a direct link between the practice of yoga and a child’s emotional regulation and happiness. The emotional awareness children gained from practicing mediation meditation and yoga promoted

better friend relationships as well as a healthier happier state of mind as noted in the table above.

3. Transferable skill

This study has demonstrated evidence that supports the current policy consensus that yoga and mindfulness have the ability to promote a positive wellbeing and to help children emotionally regulate. The participants of this study, in tandem with society as a whole, endure daily stresses which include peer exclusion, peer pressure, academic performance concerns, parental pressure, being victims of bullying, and homework difficulties. Scholars argue that the result of these accumulative stresses negatively impact on children's mental wellbeing (Hagan and Nayar, 2014; Bazzano et al, 2018). The National Youth Mental Health Task Force was established by the Irish Government in 2016 to alleviate the mental health problems arising amongst children. Nationally, figures reveal that in 2015, 'depressive disorders' were the reason for a high proportion of the admissions among children to psychiatric hospitals/units and child and adolescent units (National Psychiatric In-Patient Reporting System 2015). It would therefore suggest that creating positive opportunities for children within a classroom is vital. A poignant finding supporting the interventions of yoga and meditation in the classroom is that the participants are now also practicing yoga and mindfulness at home.

*"I would do it for a little before my homework so I can concentrate at my maths".
(Sarah, 2019)*

“When I’m bored I find a little space and cross my legs and close my eyes for a little while and think of a wonderful thought.” (May 2019)

“I would do it at home because it will be good for you and if your really hyper after school and you just don’t want to do your homework you could do a bit of mediation and then homework.” (Max, 2019)

The ability to utilise this skill outside of the classroom by the children is a clear indicator that meditation is a transferable skill that can be used, if needed, to emotionally regulate or relax. As an educator, one should strive towards a deeply satisfying education for one’s pupils, helping them grow emotionally as well as academically. This cannot be achieved without care or without the realisation that each student has individual struggles. It is the goal of an educator to teach life skills, making them applicable to any given situation and it is a testament to how useful the children think yoga and mindfulness can be.

4.6.4 Achievement and Happiness

The third and final theme that arose as a key finding was the benefit of teaching growth mindset strategies in tandem with yoga and meditation. There was a sense of achievement and happiness that emerged as a result of both interventions. There were growth mindset interventions put in place in tandem with a course of six yoga classes and multiple mindfulness sessions. Through mindset immersion in the classroom there was a cultivated environment of growth and positivity. Though both interventions were significantly different, they had similarities; one holistic and the other directly focusing on overcoming challenges and instilling a joy of discovery.

Both interventions allowed the children to experience a significant sense of achievement.

Throughout the yoga and meditation interventions the children learned that there was more of an art to yoga than simply attempting a variety of stretches. Participants became familiar with the poses and techniques. The children who would not be as athletic as their counterparts (when it comes to football and athletics), appeared to find confidence and pride in their ability to participate. Quotes taken from field notes on observations of the children throughout the yoga classes offer some insight;

“I got it”,

“I’m really good at this”,

“Teacher I can do the cat now and the snake”

“I know the cobra.”

When the children spoke these words they were said with great enthusiasm and delight. This is a clear positive outcome of the yoga intervention as it gave the children a sense of achievement. Another accomplishment came directly from the growth mindset strategies. The participants came to see the benefits of their perseverance when faced with a challenge. As previously stated, mindset language became a part of the children’s vernacular. There were many occasions when a participant would exclaim delight in their perseverance and have pride in their achievement:

“I used my growth mindset and got the answer.” (Adam, 2019)

“I got it, yes.” (Chris, 2019)

This is clear indication that there were positive outcomes as a result of achievement. A resounding indication that the overall objective of the project was met was the

recurring reference to happiness by participants. Happiness is “conceptualized as a relatively stable positive affective trait that underscores life-satisfaction and subjective well-being and is partially heritable” (Holder, Klassen; 2010:420). It is a common thread in both interventions and the participants frequently used positive language to describe their experience of the interventions. When the children had to document how they felt after yoga these words were used (See Figure 4.9).

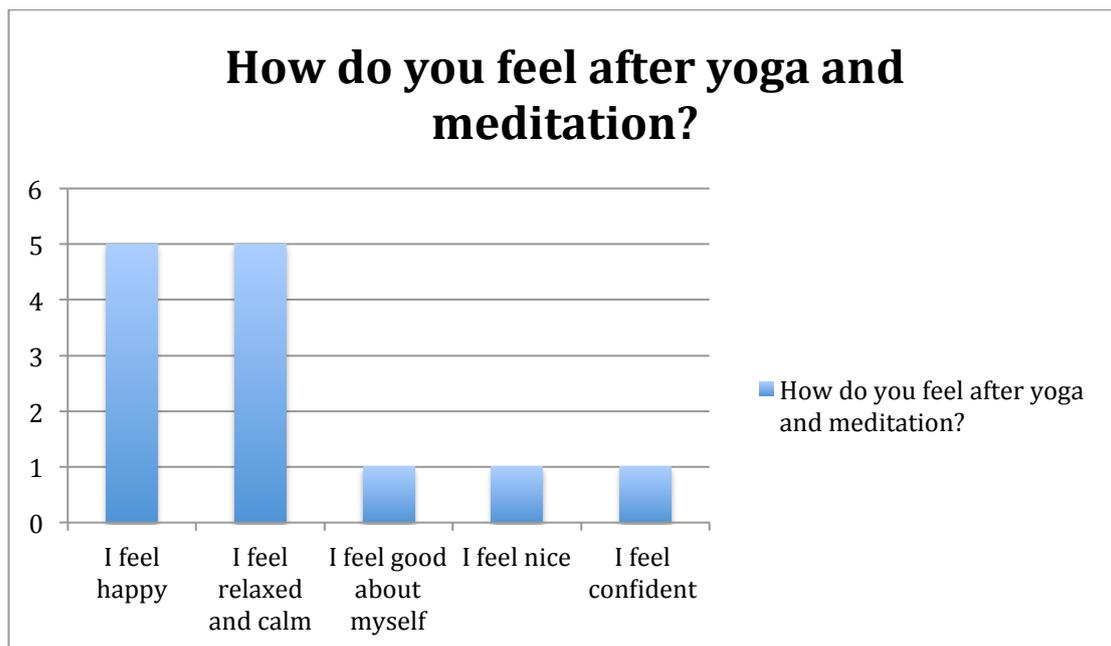


Figure 4.9

The language that the children used to describe how they felt clearly portrays a positive outcome as a result of the intervention. There was a sense of achievement and happiness which cultivated a positive classroom environment. With the context of this study taken into account the fact that the participants derive such emotions from these interventions reinforces the positive effect growth mindset combined with yoga and meditation can have.

5.0 Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion

5.1 *Limitations*

No study is beyond limitations and if I am to adopt a growth mindset it is necessary to identify where new efforts can be made. Limitations are not inherently negative but rather an opportunity for a new challenge.

- This study was an isolated intervention, a short-term pilot programme of one class group. To gain further insight into the validity of the found benefits it would be beneficial to take a whole school approach to increase the sample size. This would provide a larger data corpus that a researcher could analysis.
- This study concentrated on one specific socio-economic group of people. It would be interesting to extend this study to contrasting environments and compare the results.
- The nature of measuring wellbeing is a difficult task and the interviews were insightful but rather short. If this study was longer there would be the opportunity to revisit the interviews. This would allow a before and after questioning.

5.2 *Recommendations*

5.2.1 *Summer Courses*

The rich knowledge I gained over the course of this study has been illuminating. It has ignited an excitement within me. I have the intentions of designing and facilitating a summer course focused on creating positive opportunities for children in the classroom. The NCCA (2017) published wellbeing guidelines for primary schools including these ideas. However, I argue that teachers have not been given the continuous professional training needed to ensure that the wellbeing of each child is being cared for. Many teachers have reported feeling unprepared when entering the

classroom and feel ill-equipped especially in the areas surrounding social-emotional development (Walton and Hibbard, 2019). Wellbeing is something which needs to be fostered from the beginning of a child's education and incorporated throughout. I would like to spread this knowledge and the vehicle to do this would be through facilitating summer courses.

5.2.2 A Sharing Platform

I intended to continue spreading the results of this project, I have presented twice to an academic audience and have the hopes of presenting at the SPHE conference later this year. I would also be open to the thought of writing a blog for an educational website or potentially publishing work in the Irish Teachers Journal. I am passionate about utilising this project to give other teachers new perspectives and ideas.

5.2.3 Within My Own School

Within my own school I would like to present the findings to the staff and hopefully spur a school-wide approach to daily meditation after the children's lunch break. There is also the opportunity to set up groups within the school to meet and share good practice and ideas. I also think that there is scope to inform the parents of the benefits of teaching children strategies to improve emotional regulation. Finally, I think a specific Wellbeing Policy could be written for the school as I realise it is an ever-growing area of importance

5.2.4 Initial Teacher Education Institutions

As this is a relatively new domain it would be beneficial to provide a module in an initial teacher education institution. Newly qualified teachers may find starting a new

job daunting and are often solely focused on their induction year. I think it would be important to remind them that children need time to develop in all aspects of the classroom. The newly qualified teachers could utilize many of the strategies and incorporate growth mindset interventions into their classrooms. As your first year teaching can be a stressful time a specific module based around the findings of this study could spur a teacher themselves to realise the importance of reflection, yoga and meditation.

5.3 Conclusion

Through my research it has become apparent that society, as a whole needs to be more cognisant of the importance of reflection and acknowledge that children today have their own daily struggles akin to those of adults. As this is a self-study action research project I think it important once again to reflect on the research question, “How can I create positive opportunities for the children in my classroom?” It is through meta-reflection that we uncover truths about ourselves and our teaching. I am no longer a living contradiction, I am actively reflecting on my values, context and striving towards delivering a positive curriculum embedded within a classroom orientated by growth. I now realise the importance of time. I strive to allow children time for reflection, time for mistakes, time for improvements, time for planning and revisiting problems. The outcomes derived from this project illustrate the many benefits of simple mindset, meditation and yoga interventions. The results demonstrate that the implemented strategies do not infringe on the time allocated to delivering the national curriculum; they do not detract from it but instead increase its receptivity as a result of the enhanced wellbeing of the student.

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Appendix A



Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Dear Board of Management,

I am a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. As part of my degree I am doing a research project. The focus of my research is based on promoting a positive mental attitude in the classroom. In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in the classroom by applying strategies, reflective diary entries and collaboratively working with parents throughout the year.

The data will be collected using observations, student interviews, and informal/formal conversations with parents, a daily teacher journal and the pupil's reflective journals. The child's name, parents name and the name of the school will not be included in the thesis that I will write at the end of the research. Any child will be allowed withdraw from the research process at any stage.

All information will be confidential and information will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The research will not be carried out until you the board of Scoil Mhuire and the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education grant approval. I have attached my drafted consent forms for both children and parents. My research proposal is also available if needed. If you have any queries on any part of this research project feel free to contact me by email at lucybrannock@gmail.com.

Beidh mé ag súil le freagra uait in am is í dtráth.

Le mór-mheas,

Lucy Brannock

Appendix B



**Maynooth University Froebel
Department of
Primary and Early Childhood
Education**

**Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus
Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.**

Dear parents,

I am current undertaking a Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. As part of my degree I am doing a research project. The focus of my research is based on promoting a positive mental attitude in the classroom. In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in the classroom by applying strategies, reflective diary entries and collaboratively working with you and your child throughout the year.

The data will be collected using observations, student interviews, and informal/formal conversations with you, a daily teacher journal and the pupil's reflective journals. Your child's name, your name and the name of the school will not be included in the essay that I will write at the end of the research. Any child will be allowed withdraw from the research process at any stage.

All information will be confidential and information will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The research will not be carried out until you grant approval. If you have any queries on any part of this research project feel free to contact me. If you are willing to help me in conducting this research I will be holding an information meeting with details to follow after the midterm break.

Kind regards,

Lucy Brannock



**Maynooth University Froebel
Department of
Primary and Early Childhood
Education**

**Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus
Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Má Nuad.**

Information Sheet Parents and Guardians

What is this Action Research Project about?

This project will involve me studying how I teach. I will be gathering information using observation, reflective diaries, notes and questionnaires. I am then going to write a lengthily essay about my project.

What are the research questions?

- How do I promote a positive mental attitude in my classroom?
- How do I alter a fixed mindset?

What sorts of methods will be used?

- Observation, Reflective Journal, Questionnaires and interviews.

Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by me as part of the Master of Education course in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. The essay will be reviewed by Dr Bernadette Wrynn and will be examined by the Department staff. The external examiners will also access the final essay.

What are you being asked to do?

You are being asked to give your permission for me to complete this study with my class. All data I collect will be kept confidentially and no names will be written. The data captured will only be used for the purpose of the research as part of the Master of Education in the Froebel Department, Maynooth University and will be destroyed in accordance with University guidelines.

I will set up meeting after school to have an informal chat about what the project will involve and I hope to work with both you and your child throughout the project.



**Maynooth University Froebel Department of
Primary and Early Childhood
Education**

**Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus
Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad**

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

I have read the information provided in the attached letter and all of my questions have been answered. I voluntarily agree to the participation of my child in this study. I am aware that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my information.

Parent / Guardian Signature _____

Parent / Guardian Signature _____

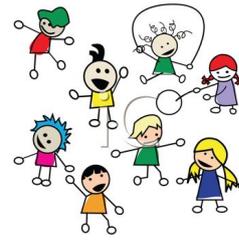
Date: _____

Name of Child _____

Child's signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C



Child's name

I am doing a project in college all about taking on challenges and the benefits of thinking positively. I would like you to help me complete this project. It will be like an experiment where we will try new ways of thinking for a few weeks. I will be writing the results and you will also be keeping a reflective diary in school, I will share my results with you and you will share your reflective diary with me.

Would you be ok with that? Pick a box

 Yes **No**

I have asked your Mum or Dad or Guardian to talk to you about this. If you have any questions I would be happy to answer them. If you are happy with that could you sign the form that I have sent home? If you change your mind after we start, that's ok too.



**Maynooth University Froebel Department of
Primary and Early Childhood
Education**

**Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus
Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.**

Child's assent to participate

**My parent/guardian has read the information sheet with me
and I agree to take part in this research.**

Name of child (in block capitals):

Wellbeing self-assessment

Statement	None of the time	Some of the time	All of the time
I've been feeling excited about the future	1	2	3
I've been feeling useful	1	2	3
I've been feeling relaxed	1	2	3
I've been feeling good about myself	1	2	3
I've been feeling loved	1	2	3
I've been feeling happy	1	2	3

Appendix E Goal Setting Template

1. I will learn

2. My deadline for this is

3. The things I need to do this are

4. Things that may stop me are

5. I will overcome this by

6. If I make a mistake I will

7. My fixed mindset might say

8. My Growth mindset will respond

Appendix F Interview Transcripts
Interview one (26/3/2019)

Can you explain to me what a growth mindset and a fixed mindset are?

Rachel: A growth mindset is where you take on the challenge and a fixed mindset is where you don't take on the challenge. Your like ahhhhh I can't do this and I can't do that and this is just not my thing.

Don: A fixed mindset is like you don't want to do like homework, and a good mindset is when you do homework and lots of energy in your brain.

What mindset do you think you have?

Rachel: I think sometimes I have a fixed and sometimes I have a growth because sometimes I'm stuck on things, I think I can't do it but when I use my growth mindset I go right ahead.

What mindset do you think you have?

Don: Like am a fixed.

You think you have a fixed mindset why?

Don: Because ammm.

Do you know what a fixed mindset is?

Don: *Shakes head*

It is when you don't take on the challenge.

Don: Oh I have growth because sometimes I help my mum with like all the busy things like the dishes and the walls.

Do you think we have done anything in school to help your mindset?

Rachel: When I start crying when I am confused people just keep telling me to take on the challenge you got this. And I then take on the challenge and I probably get my test all right or some wrong but at least I'm going to improve right?

Don: Am feed the chickens.

Do you think a growth mindset is just for school or could it be useful outside of school?

Rachel: Am no you can use it in jobs, in restaurants, in your work.

How could you use it in work?

Rachel: If you like, if you're a maths teacher and you didn't study well and were not getting enough students and didn't take on the challenge you grab a sheet of paper you ask your helpers in the class to am to photocopy this for everyone.

What is yoga and meditation?

Don: It's a place where you do poses like a tree, a baby and crab walks.

Rachel: Yoga and meditation to if you're really excited and really angry to relieve stress, like to relieve all that stress and if you're really ecstatic you put your head down focus on your breathing and listen to music and you take a nap and all that stress, anger and excitement will be out of you and you'll be just flowing free.

Why do you think we do yoga and meditation in school?

Don: To give you more power to get your energy better

Rachel: So we can like concentrate on our tests

How do you feel after yoga and meditation?

Rachel: Relaxed

Don: Relaxed

Would you like to do meditation outside of school maybe at home or in the community centre?

Rachel: I wouldn't feel comfortable alone doing it I think it's important in school, I don't think that music we have in school you can get anywhere else not on our

phones, our tablets, Xboxes, ps4s, pads I don't think we can get that I think it's something special only for school.

Don: I think it's bad on a basketball court wouldn't be good.

No not outside but in another building like your bedroom, kitchen or anywhere inside?

Don: I'd do it at home because if you forget about all the games you can just remember how to do yoga all the time.

Interview Two (26/3/2019)

Can you explain to me what a growth mindset is?

Mary: It's where you think you can take on a challenge.

Adam: You think you can believe in yourself.

And what is a fixed mindset?

Mary: It's when you don't believe in yourself.

Adam: It's when you say I'm bad at it and I don't know it.

Do you think it is important to have a growth mindset or a fixed mindset?

Mary: A growth mindset because you have to believe in yourself and there is a special word it's at the end of it, I can't do it yet.

Adam: You can do it and nothing can stop you.

What mindset do you think you have?

Mary: I think I have a growth mindset .

Adam: A growth mindset.

Do you think you have always had a growth mindset?

Mary: No

Adam: No

Do you think we have learned anything in school to help your mindset?

Mary: When we are learning about different things like food that are from different countries when you're going home you are telling your parents about it you have learnt something.

Do you think a growth mindset is just for school or could it be useful outside of school?

Mary: At home too, sometimes you are doing your homework and you say I cant do it yet, I cant do my joint writing yet. Maybe baking sometimes when your helping your mam and you mess it up and it goes bad you actually learn.

And what do you think Adam? Do you think a growth mindset is just for school or could it be useful outside of school?

Adam: I don't know

What is yoga?

Adam: Yoga is like you can stretch

Mary: It's to calm you down

Adam: It's like to feel yourself comfortable

Why do you think we do yoga and meditation in school?

Mary: So you can believe in yourself and calm down and getting everything that's wrong out of your mind, like say if you got someone's car dirty.

How do you feel after yoga and meditation?

Adam: I feel happy

Mary: I feel confident

Why would you feel confident?

Mary: Because I can explain that I if I did something wrong after I feel calm, I can explain to the people when I did something wrong why it happened.

Would you like to do meditation outside of school?

Adam: In school because outside might be cold or windy.

Well not outside school in the yard, I mean in your house or in the community centre?

Adam: I would like to.

Mary: Yes I would because it would be useful outside of school to get calm.

What do you think of our positive self-talk?

Mary: Its trying to say no matter what happens your still great

Interview Three 27/03/2019

Can you explain to me what a fixed mindset and a growth mindset are?

Colin: A fixed mindset is. What is it again?

Or can you tell me what a growth mindset is?

Colin: A growth mindset is when you take on a challenge and a fixed mindset is when you cant.

Sarah: A fixed mindset is where people think that they can't take on challenges and a growth mindset is when people take on challenges and say I can do this.

What do you think we have done in school for our mindsets?

Colin: We done our spelling tests twice.

What mindset do you think you have?

Colin: A fixed.

Why do you think you have a fixed mindset?

Colin: Oh no wait a growth because I have started trying new foods.

What mindset do you think you have?

Sarah: A growth.

Why do you think you have a growth mindset?

Sarah: Because when we are doing our spellings I think I can do think this.

What is yoga and meditation?

Colin: Its when you relax and if your angry you can sit there and do it.

Sarah: If your really hyper you can do yoga and it will calm you down a bit

How do you feel after yoga and meditation?

Colin: Nice

Sarah: Happy

Why do you think we do yoga and meditation in school?

Colin: Its important to do loads of yoga with Tina and its really nice and comfortable.

Sarah: It's good to get calm downed and all and its actually fun as well.

Would you do yoga outside of school at home for example?

Colin: Yes, at home.

When would you do it at home?

Colin: In the evening

Sarah: After school

Interview Four (27/3/2019)

Can you explain to me what a growth mindset is?

Ellie: A growth mindset is that you believe that you can't do it yet and a fixed mindset is that you believe you cant do it at all.

Molly: A growth mindset is you cant do it yet and a fixed mindset is you cant do it at all and you can't take on the challenge.

What have we done this year to help our mindsets?

Ellie: We done marvellous mistakes.

Whats that?

Ellie: Its when if you make a mistake you go on this page to show the mistake that you've done.

Molly: When you make mistakes you learn from your mistakes.

And why would you highlight your mistakes?

Am so that you remember how to learn and you learn from your mistakes.

What mindset do you think you have?

Ellie: Am I don't know

Molly: Am

Ellie: I have a growth mindset because I always take on the challenge

Molly: I think I have a growth because when you get something wrong you can try do it again.

What is yoga?

Ellie: Its after you've been busy it stops you from going crazy and helps you relax.

Molly: When you go out to play and get all crazy and after yoga you get un-crazy and can play nice and all.

Ellie: After you've been on yard it helps you relax

Do you think it is a good idea to do yoga and meditation in school?

Molly: It's important to do it in school because when you get all un-crazy and relax and get very nice and do things for other people.

Ellie: It stops you been hyper on your teachers and all

Would you like to do meditation outside of school?

Molly: When I'm bored I find a little space and cross my legs and close my eyes for a little while and think of a wonderful thought

Ellie: When I come home from school my mam she puts on this thing where you do yoga and I copy off it.

Interview Five 27/3/2019

Can you explain to me what a fixed and growth mindset are?

Zoe: A growth mindset is when you take on the challenge and when you never give up. A fixed mindset is when you can think you can never do it ever and never take on the challenge

Max: If you have a fixed mindset you think you can never do anything but a growth mindset you take on the challenge and you think you are really good at it.

What have we done this year to help our mindset?

Zoe: We learned that mistakes are very marvellous and that you can learn from them.

Max: You can learn from your mistakes and if you want to like do your homework and you think you cant do it you'd just get in trouble but if you have a growth mindset you wont get in trouble because you can do it yet.

What mindset do you think you have?

Zoe: A growth but sometimes a fixed but most times growth because I always think I can do it.

Max: I think I have both sometimes I think it's a bit too hard and sometimes I think its ok

What is yoga and meditation?

Zoe: Its like to help people relax after yard when we are still a bit hyper after yard then we do a little bit of meditation and it tells you to close you eyes and imagine things.

Max: Yoga is like if your tired and want to wake up a bit yoga is like a bit of exercise.

How do you feel after yoga and meditation?

Zoe: Relaxed

Max: I feel happy

Why do we do yoga?

Zoe: Maybe because we do lots of running around and lot of people could stay hyper but when we do our yoga we aren't still talking about yard.

Max: To help us to be more confidence.

Would you like to do meditation outside of school?

Zoe: I would do it sometimes if my friend was there I would know someone.

Max: I would do it at home because it will be good for you and if your really hyper after school and you just don't want to do your homework you could do a bit of mediation and then homework.

Interview Six 28/03/2019 (Only interviewed one child as her partner was sick)

Can you explain to me what a fixed and growth mindset are?

Sarah: Its something that you can take on the challenge and you haven't got it yet, but you have to take it on so if you don't know how to spell a word and you say you cant do it that a fixed. A growth is when you take on a challenge and say you can't do it yet and like marvellous mistakes and if you make a mistake it's a good thing you learn from your mistakes.

What have we done this year to help our mindset?

Sarah: We did lots of spelling tests and it helped me when I got some wrong and maths is kind of good because it helps your brain grow.

What mindset do you think you have?

Sarah: I think I have a growth because I always take on challenges.

Do you think a growth mindset is just for school or could it be useful outside of school?

Sarah: It can be good at home because if your playing a football match you have to believe in yourself you can win

What is yoga and meditation?

Sarah: Yoga is something to calm you down if your hyper and all. Mediation is what we do when you come in from yard if your all hyper you can put your head down and think about happy things and relax.

How do you feel after yoga and meditation?

Sarah: Relaxed because I'm after closing my eyes.

Why do we do yoga in school?

Sarah: I think because we go out to yard and we are out there for a good while and when we come in we are all yelling and all we just put our heads down and relaxed.

Would you like to do meditation outside of school?

I would do it for a little before my homework so I can concentrate at my maths.

Interview Seven (28/03/2019)

Can you explain to me what a fixed and growth mindset is?

Ann: So a growth mindset is where you can take on the challenges and you can do maths and all and you say you cant do it yet.

Alan: A fixed mindset is where you can't take on the challenge and you don't think you can do it.

What have we done this year to help our mindset?

Ann: Am doing like maths and marvellous mistakes.

What mindset do you think you have?

Ann: I think I have a growth mindset because if I get an answer wrong I don't mind because I know I get loads of answers right.

Alan: A growth mindset because, am, I take on the challenge.

Do you think a growth mindset is just for school or could it be useful outside of school?

Ann: Its not just for school it could be for home.

Alan: No, you could use it playing GAA, or reading or colouring.

What is yoga and meditation?

Ann: Its where you relax when we come in from yard we do it to make us very calm.

Alan: I think because so we can like relax and not get like sore legs after yard.

How do you feel after yoga and meditation?

Ann: Very relaxed and happy as well.

Alan: I feel good about myself

Would you like to do meditation outside of school?

Alan: sometimes after my homework so you can get your homework done with.



**Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood
Education
Master of Education (Research in practice) (MEd)**

Ethics Approval for Master of Education (Research in Practice)

Student name:	Lucy Brannock
Student Number:	12273040
Supervisor:	Dr Bernadette Wrynn
Programme:	Master of Education Research in Practice
Thesis title:	How can I create positive experiences/opportunities in my classroom?
Research Question(s):	How can I create positive experiences/opportunities in my classroom? What is growth mindset? What are strategies can I put in place to create positive experiences for the participants? What is wellbeing? How can the existing primary curriculum provide positive experiences for children?
Intended start date of data collection:	January 2019
Professional Ethical Codes or Guidelines used:	Maynooth University Ethical Guidelines, Data Protection Acts (Government of Ireland 2014), UN Declaration of the Rights of a Child 1959, Child First: National Guidance for Protection & Welfare of Children 2017, Children First Act 2015, School Child Protection Procedures.

1(a) Research Participants: Who will be involved in this research? *(Tick all that apply)*

Early years / pre-school

Primary school students

Secondary school students

Young people (aged 16 – 18 years)

Adults

The participants in this project are a class of fourteen-second class students and their parents. I aim to work collaboratively with the participants to find ways in which I can change their outlook to have a positive affect on their learning and my teaching. I wish to gain a richer understanding of what it means to have a growth mindset and hope to cultivate a positive mental attitude in my classroom.

1(b) Recruitment and Participation/sampling approach: Following the Belmont idea of justice, I have selected my participants without any bias. My participants are a result of the class I have been assigned to teach. I have had an informal conversation with my principal who I identify as a key gatekeeper to the project, I have also written a letter to the Board of Management asking permission to conduct the project. As I teach Second Class I need permission from parents. I will send a letter seeking permission from the parents detailing the objectives of the project. I will then invite the children in my class to participate in my research project. I will explain the aims, methods and potential outcomes of my project. I will assure anonymity, accurate data records and a clear explanation of the structure of the project

2. Summary of Planned Research I have chosen to base my research project around fostering a positive mindset in my classroom. A mindset in essence is a set off beliefs and attitudes. In the case of this project it is linked with intellectual capability and attainment. I am curious to understand how people cope with their failures, overcome challenges and persevere to finding solutions. My research is not a quantitative piece of research rather a qualitative project. Due to the fact that I am basing my study around people it maybe subject to change, my numbers may fluctuate depending on the school year. The project will be based around 14 children along with their parents. The school where I teach has a catholic ethos, meaning its student teacher relationships are built with mutual respect where each teacher cares for the uniqueness and dignity of each pupil. The school is DEIS 1 meaning many of the children are from a low socioeconomic background. My methodology will be to follow a step-by-step procedure in order to build a solid foundation on which the mindset of the children can evolve throughout the year. My data collection tools will be varied, my own personal observations, the children in my class will be keeping reflective journals and also interviews with the parents on their thoughts on the progression in their child's attitude towards problems.

3. Ethical Issues:

Vulnerability

It will be my greatest intention to show the utmost respect for human dignity when conducting my project. The ultimate goal of my project is to influence my current classroom situation for the better; I will take special precaution for any unforeseen circumstances that may lead to one of my participants feeling uncomfortable or distressed. I adhere and honor the UN Declaration of the rights of a child 1959; similar to the Child First Protection Guidelines, stating that education available to pupils must meet their individual needs and abilities. I will carefully observe all my participants to diminish any discomfort or harm on an on-going basis throughout my project.

Power Dynamics

To avoid the natural imbalance of power dynamics within this research project I must not view the participants as “passive receptors” (Broch 2014:13). I will treat each participant with the upmost respect; I view each child as an individual learner and I will take a child centered approach throughout my research. I will give the students the option to opt in or out of my research and will stress that there will be no reward or punishment for their decision. I will also stress this point to the parents when asking for their permission for their child to participate. With respect to my working community, I will ask for permission and also seek help from colleagues to work collaboratively together continuing to build on our existing honest and open relationship.

Informed Consent and assent

I will be seeking an informed consent from all participants included in my research project. Through a written letter and informal conversations I will be asking participants to give their consent voluntarily in order to be included. Both the children and parents will be asked for their individual consent. I will also be asking the permission from my Board of Management as well as asking for the ethical approval from the Froebel Department of Maynooth University.

Sensitivity

My project is based on a child’s mindset and outlook. There are external factors that may influence these results. There are a number of children who come from unstable family backgrounds and they can at times be tired and emotionally impacted as a result of their home lives. For example one of the participants in my study is from a fostered background. In his case I am conscious that he becomes emotionally unstable when a home visit occurs. He becomes upset easily and finds it difficult to emotionally regulate the weeks before and after. I need to be aware of this type of information when gathering and analysing my data. I also have participants that have English as an additional language, therefore when asking for permission and having informal conversations with them I must ensure I am clear and I have been understood.

Data Storage

I am aware that children and their parents have rights protected under Data Protection Acts (Government of Ireland 2014). I will be collecting and storing the

minimum amount of personal information, when writing about my participants I will be using pseudonyms and I will ensure that all my data collected will be only accessible to me. I will also destroy any data collected on completion of the project in compliance with the projects guidelines. As a teacher I think that I am also already aware of the importance of confidentiality and I it is my main priority to protect the rights of my participants

Attachments

Please attach, where available and applicable, information letters, consent forms and other materials that will be used to inform potential participants about this research.

Declaration

'I confirm that to the best of my knowledge this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of undertaking this research.' If any of the conditions of this proposed research change, I confirm that I will re-negotiate ethical clearance with my supervisor.

Signed: *Lucy Brannock* Date: 29/09/18

Supervisor use only:

Date Considered: _____

Approved

Approved with recommendations (see below)

Referred back to applicant

Referred to Department Research and Ethics Committee

Recommendations:

Signature of supervisor: _____

Department use only: (only where applicable)

Date Considered: _____

Approved by Froebel Department Research and Ethics committee

Approved with recommendations (see below)

Referred back to applicant (changes to be approved by supervisor)

Referred to Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Subcommitt

Recommendations:

Signature of Dept. Ethics Committee Chair: _____

Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Subcommittee use only (only where applicable)

Date Considered: _____

Approved

Referred back to applicant and supervisor

Signed:

FSS Research Ethics Committee nominee

